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IN ANGUISH OF SPIRIT THE BRAVE BOY RAISED HIS RIGHT HAND.

ISODOR THE YOUNG CONSPIRATOR OR THE FATAL LEAGUE

A Tale of the "Lopez Revolution" of 1849 in
"The Ever Faithful Isle."

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE CONSPIRATOR'S HOME.

UPON the shores of the beautiful island of Cuba, so correctly named the "Gem of the Antilles," there stand to-day the ruins of what was once a grand villa, the home of a Cuban planter, whose vast estates surrounded his abode for miles, and who counted his gold by millions, his slaves by hundreds.

Built upon the spur of a range of hills, that, breaking off as it approached the sea, ran in a gentle slope down to the snowy beach, and with numerous wings, gable-ends and several towers, the villa looked, in its halcyon days like some grand old castle, the home of a mighty lord of the soil; now it is but a ruin, with creeping vines seemingly striving to hide its crumbling walls from view, and weeds and flowers growing up between the cracks in the marble-paved plaza, while no human being dwells near.

For nearly thirty years Villa Vista has been in ruins, and during the Cuban Revolution of ten years ago, in which the crew of the *Virginus*, under the lamented Fry and Ryan met their fate, the author of these lines stood within its crumbling walls, along with a company of brave patriots, and beat back an attacking force of Spaniards.

But it is of the Villa Vista, when it was the home of Don Piedra Christobal, that I would speak.

The Don was a Cuban born, come of a good old line of ancestors; but, entering the Spanish army, had seen service in Spain and risen to the rank of colonel; but through all he had sympathized with his native island and her wrongs at the hands of Spain's rulers, and resigning his commission had returned to his estate, to enjoy a life of luxury with his family, which consisted of a wife and two children, a son and daughter.

In the care of his estate, and the enjoyment of his home, Colonel Christobal found the days glide by without *ennui*, for his mansion was furnished with almost palatial magnificence; there were slaves to do his every bidding, hounds for the chase, horses by the score in his stables, and in the well sheltered bay, to which the villa grounds gently sloped, were yachts and pleasure-boats to invite a sail and row upon the waters.

The view from the villa was one of picturesque beauty, with the blue sea in front, and the coast up and down visible for miles, while inland, valley, hill and spreading fields met the eyes.

The grounds were dotted with parterres of flowers, the perfume of which filled the balmy air, forests near by invited to their cooling shades, and birds were trilling their matin and vesper songs in very gladness at the beauty of nature about them.

Yet, amid all this scene of luxury and beauty, a cloud came gradually upon the dark handsome face of Colonel Christobal, a shadow that at last caused his lovely wife to ask:

"Piedra, my husband, what is it that has clouded your face of late, for I have seen that you carry a sorrow in your heart?"

Colonel Christobal started, for he was not aware that he had allowed the shadows in his heart to cast their gloom upon his face; and he answered lightly:

"No, no, Magdalena, I am perfectly well, and you have no reason to worry about me."

"Well in body, yes, Piedra; but not in mind. Do not evade an answer—do not deceive me, for am I not the one in whom you should trust?" and the loving wife laid her hand gently upon her husband's arm.

Springing to his feet, Don Christobal, for he was so called more often than he was given his military title, paced to and fro upon the veranda, for the two had been seated upon the sea side of the villa, overlooking the then placid waters spread out before them.

For a few moments he walked back and forth, while his brow grew darker and darker; but the Senora Magdalena said no more, only gazed anxiously upon his face.

At length he paused before his wife, and taking her hand said:

"Come, my wife, let us walk to yonder arbor, for even in our own home the walls may have ears, and what I would say you alone must know."

She arose in silence, and resting her hand upon his arm, walked with him to the pretty rustic arbor he had pointed to.

It was built of logs, over which the vines had run in graceful festoons, and within it were seats, a table, a spy-glass upon a bracket, several books upon a shelf, and a guitar stood in a corner.

It was evidently a favorite retreat of the household, and taking a seat upon the wicker settee, Don Piedra drew his wife down by his side, and said:

"Here, wife, we cannot be overheard in what we may say."

"Is it then so terrible?" asked the Senora Christobal, with a shudder, as though a foreboding of evil had swept over her.

"Alas! wife, the cloud that you have seen upon my brow is but the reflection of one that is hovering over our poor land, for trouble is brewing that will yet break forth in a storm which can bring only bloodshed, disaster and suffering, though in the end I trust it may bring peace and freedom to Cubans."

"My dear Piedra! do you mean that there are the mutterings of a revolution heard in the island?" anxiously asked the senora.

"Yes, Magdalena, that is just what I do mean, for a few bold spirits are determined to

throw off the yoke of Spain, which so galls the necks of Cubans, and strive to free our island from the tyranny of Spaniards."

"Ah, Piedra!"

"Well may you exclaim, my wife; but my words are true, and only yesterday I received a second communication from the gallant General Lopez, who is now in the United States, telling me that he would land with an expedition before many months, and urging me to form secret leagues among the Cubans whom I feel that I can trust, so that, when he lands, there may be an army of daring men to meet him, and march with him to victory."

"And what have you done in the matter, my husband?"

"What could I do, wife, but obey the call of my tyranny-crushed country?"

"I have seen certain planters, and they are now forming secret leagues, and I am to be their chief."

"Oh, Piedra! Piedra! if all should fail, you are lost!"

"True, my life must go for my country."

"Alas! alas that is so; but our boy, our noble Isodor?"

"I have not spoken to him upon the subject, as he is but a boy, and I have demanded of all my sub-leaders, that they tell him nothing, for, should I be taken, Magdalena, he must be the protector of his mother and sister—ah! there he comes now, and Estrella is with him," and the Cuban conspirator chief pointed to two persons emerging from the forest, and riding slowly toward the villa by the drive that would lead them by the arbor.

CHAPTER II.

ISODOR AND ESTRELLA.

THE two who approached the arbor, were a youth and a maiden, so strangely alike that one seeing them could not but be struck by their perfect resemblance, the one to the other.

The maiden appeared the elder of the two, being perhaps eighteen, while the youth was seventeen.

Though very beautiful, and with features the perfection of symmetry, the maiden yet possessed a face that was full of fearlessness and resolution, that chimed in well with her loveliness, rather than marred it.

Her form, arrayed in a close-fitting riding-habit of snowy cloth, trimmed with gold braid, was slender, above the average height, but of perfect mold, and her haughty head, adorned with a soft sombrero, encircled by a scarf of gold thread, was poised well over her somewhat solid-looking shoulders.

She sat her spirited horse with ease and grace, and toyed with a gold-headed riding-whip as she rode along.

Such was Estrella Christobal, a beauty and an heiress, and who trampled upon even the hearts of haughty Spanish nobles and officers.

Her brother, Isodor, was as handsome as she was beautiful, and in repose his eyes were almost as soft in their expression, but when lighted up with inward emotion they seemed fairly to blaze, and few men cared to meet their angry gaze, boy though he was in years.

He was a trifle taller than his sister, and his form was slender and willowy; but he possessed remarkable strength and endurance, and as a horseman and athlete had never met his superior.

Reared at home under the care of an American tutor and governess, a gentleman and his wife whom the Don had met while traveling in the United States, the brother and sister had studied, painted and learned music together, while in outdoor sports Estrella had emulated Isodor in riding, shooting and the management of a sail-boat.

The American tutor was skilled in manly sports, as well as being a scholar, and he taught both the brother and sister to fence and to shoot a pistol, while, reared upon the sea-shore they could row a boat, and sail a yacht from the time they were respectively eight and nine years of age.

Such were the children of Don Christobal, and it is no wonder that their parents idolized them, for they were as pure in character as they were accomplished, and the humblest slave on the plantation adored them.

Living as he did in luxury, with a loving wife and devoted children about him, it was no wonder that the mutterings of war brought a cloud upon the heart of the brave Cuban.

He knew well that in the coming struggle he could not stand idly by; he knew that his life must be offered, his gold must be given for the patriot cause, and if disaster followed, that his riches would be swept from him, his life, maybe,

would be the forfeit, and desolation, sorrow, and death must come.

His brave, noble boy he wished to keep out of the Secret League of Conspirators, for if it came to the worst he could fly with his mother and sister to America and there find a home.

To guard for the welfare of those he loved, the Don had sent to the former tutor of his children, a large sum to invest in America for them, and subject to Isodor's order, so that if all in Cuba was sacrificed, and death came to him, they at least would not suffer with want.

So matters stood at the time this story opens, and when Don Christobal made known to his wife, in the Sea View Arbor, the secret of the Patriot League.

As the brother and sister rode up to the arbor, Isodor threw himself from his horse and gallantly aided Estrella to alight, after which he placed the handle of his riding-whip in his mouth and gave three shrill blasts.

A moment after a negro, clad in a white suit and wearing a palm-leaf hat, came at a run from the stables and led the horses away, while Isodor and Estrella sat down by their parents in the arbor.

"Suppose we call Nemo, husband, and have our tea in the arbor," said the Senora Christobal.

"No, mother, for we are to have a guest for supper," said Isodor, with a sly look at his sister.

"Indeed! Who is it?" asked the Don.

"We met Colonel Cazandra Morelos in the valley, and he said he would ride over to see you, senor, and take tea; but my idea is that he is in love with sister, and is coming to see her."

"Oh, Isodor! how can you tease me so, for you know I do not care at all for Colonel Morelos."

"Don't feel bad, sister, for I was only joking, as certainly a true Cuban girl could not love a Spaniard, and one who puts his iron heel upon our race whenever he can."

"You are rich and beautiful, and come of a good old family, and Colonel Morelos loves you; but were you poor, friendless and less lonely, I would be far different with the gallant Spaniard," and Isodor's eyes flashed, and he spoke with a bitterness his parents had never known him to show before, and they glanced anxiously toward each other.

"No danger of my loving a Spaniard, Isodor," answered Estrella, quietly; while Don Christobal said:

"My son, do not let any one else hear you utter such words as you just gave utterance to before your mother, sister and myself, for we are under Spanish rule and must not rebel against the destiny that has fallen upon Cubans."

"*Madre de Dios!* but I will not always submit to be the slave of Spaniards!" rung from the boy's lips, and he sprang to his feet in excitement, just as a party of horsemen dashed into sight from the forest.

"It is Colonel Morelos and his escort."

"Isodor, I command you to utter no rebellious words before that man!" said Don Christobal sternly, and as he spoke, there dashed up to the arbor and drew rein a Spanish officer and half a dozen troopers.

CHAPTER III.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.

THE one who rode up to the arbor and dismounted, throwing his bridle-rein to one of his troopers, was a well-preserved man of forty.

That he was a Spaniard his looks indicated, and he wore the uniform of a colonel of Spanish cavalry.

His bearing was haughty, his face stern, but there was a look of refinement about him that indicated good blood.

His breast sparkled with decorations, won in battle, and he stood well with the queen, while the Captain-General of Cuba looked upon Colonel Cazandra Morelos as one of his most trusted officers.

When in Spain Don Christobal and Colonel Morelos had served together, and a certain friendship had sprung up between them, which, when the latter, years after, had been ordered to Cuba, had been renewed by an invitation to Villa Vista, in the vicinity of which the Spanish officer commanded a fort, with his troop of cavalry encamped near as a force to threaten dissatisfied Cubans.

Colonel Morelos was, as I have said, a stern man, and, but for his friendship with Don Christobal, and his having fallen in love with a fair Cuban, the Senorita Estrella, he would have been a severe master to the natives; but he was held in check by a desire to win the hand, if not the heart of the daughter of his old comrade-in-arms.

A man of supposed wealth, the fast life of the colonel kept him constantly against the wall of

debt, and he could see but one way out, and that was to marry a Cuban heiress.

Estrella Christobal, the richest and most beautiful maiden in Cuba, had been selected by the colonel, after a careful survey of the field, and he had laid siege to her heart during the six months that he had been in Cuba, but yet had received little more than kindness from her in return for his devotion.

Don Christobal did not relish the idea of his daughter becoming the wife of Colonel Morelos, nor did the Senora Christobal; but they allowed matters to run their course, as they discovered that Estrella seemed not to be deeply in love.

Thus matters stood at the time of the opening of this story.

Of late the Spanish yoke had been pressed tighter about the Cuban neck, and the iron heel of Spain had been put more heavily upon the heart-strings of the natives, so that a cloud was hovering over the land, which, not yet large enough to cast a shadow, was yet growing in size and blackness.

Colonel Morelos, once or twice, had broken out in some act of tyranny toward a Cuban, and keep it secret as he might, it yet had leaked out, and straight to Villa Vista the news had flown, reaching ears the Spaniard had not wished to hear of his deeds.

But it was policy for Cubans to treat the Spaniards well, and especially then, when Secret Leagues were being formed, ready to strike a blow against their oppressors.

Therefore Colonel Morelos received a warm welcome as he rode up to the arbor, and Isodor sounded his whistle for a slave to lead the trooper escort to the mansion and give them supper.

After a few words of general conversation, Colonel Morelos expressed a wish to see the Don alone, and Isodor escorted his mother and sister to the villa, the heart of the former sinking in dread of coming evil, for the Spaniard had looked strangely gloomy.

When the ladies and Isodor had retired, Colonel Morelos said in his calm way:

"Don Piedra, I have come over this afternoon for two reasons."

Don Christobal merely bowed, and Colonel Morelos continued:

"As you know, Senor Don, I am a trifle past two score years; but I come of a good family, have riches, a high rank, and am talked of for the captain-generalship of Cuba, after the term the present incumbent shall have ended, for I am getting along in years and wishes to return to Spain."

"With this anticipation, I ask that you allow me to offer my heart and hand to your beautiful daughter, the Senorita Estrella, whom I have reason to believe is not indifferent to me."

The Spaniard paused, and the Cuban answered, after a moment of silence, and without the slightest expression upon his face to show what he felt:

"Colonel Morelos, though your past life has not been such as I would wish in the man who was to win my daughter's love, I will say that I think, since you have been a dweller in Cuba, you have led a different life, and though, at different times, you have been unkind to my race, I will frankly tell you that you have my permission to offer your heart and hand to the Senorita Estrella, and it will rest with her as to what will be the realization of your hopes."

"Don Christobal, I sincerely thank you, and now that you have been thus frank with me, I will tell you that, allied as I will be to your daughter, my rule over her race can but be kind, and it will doubtless put an end to the present movement of Cubans to strike at the throat of Spaniards."

In spite of his nerve Don Christobal started, for the words of the Spaniard had proved that he had an inkling into the secret deeds of the Cubans; but how far this knowledge extended he could not know.

"Do you mean that there is trouble brewing, Senor Colonel," calmly asked the Don.

"I do, Don Christobal, and its full extent I know, even to the ringleaders, so I hope that you will urge the Senorita Estrella to save trouble for her country, by becoming the wife of one who will make a kind ruler to Cubans."

"It will rest with my child, senor colonel, as to what course she will take for her own happiness."

"But I have your permission to offer myself to her?"

"You have."

"I thank you, Senor Don."

"May I ask the second reason of your visit, Colonel Morelos, for you said that you had two?"

"It was to tell you that I am well informed

that there is trouble brewing among the Cubans, and to warn you to put your foot upon it, to stamp it out in its infancy, for a breaking out of insurrectionists can only recoil upon themselves."

"So see to it; my dear Don Christobal."

The Don made no reply; but he saw that the secret movements of his people were known to their masters, the Spaniards, and he was glad to be thus forewarned.

Leading the way to the villa, they were met by Estrella, who had changed her riding-habit for an evening dress, and it being the hour of tea the Don led the way to the dining-hall, and the meal passed most delightfully away, Colonel Morelos never appearing to better advantage.

But in the heart of the Don and his wife there was a deep shadow, and Isodor Christobal was silent and stern, no smile crossing his face at the wit of the Spaniard, or the gay sallies of his beautiful sister.

It was in his heart the calm before the storm that must soon break forth, for, though unknown to his father, and boy though he was, Isodor Christobal was a Cuban conspirator.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SPANIARD'S THREAT.

AFTER tea Don Christobal made it a point to send Isodor out over the plantation, upon some errand, while he drew his wife one side, leaving Colonel Morelos and Estrella alone.

The Senora Christobal had seen that the Spaniard had made some communication to her husband, and she was anxious to know just what it was, and as the two walked together down to the beach, where they often went toward sunset, to enjoy the sea breeze from the little arbor upon the pier, she asked quickly:

"Well, Piedra, what has happened?"

"Nothing as yet, my dear; but Colonel Morelos came over this afternoon to offer his love to Estrella."

"I have expected that he would; but your answer was what?"

"That he had my permission to offer his heart and hand to our child."

"Piedra! do you mean that you would see our child marry a Spaniard?" excitedly asked the Senora Christobal.

"I said not so, wife; but I gave him the consent he asked for, leaving it for Estrella to answer for herself."

"She will refuse him."

"So I hope; but I do not know how she regards him."

"Nor do I, for the girl is a sad coquette, and I confess that I am not aware whether she has ever felt love for any one or not, though I did think that she was interested in that young American yachtsman, whom you remember, took us off of the steamer that was wrecked by the storm; but as he has never visited us at our request, I suppose she has forgotten him."

"Well, I hope not, if only to prevent this Spaniard from having an influence over her, for I would never consent to see her his wife, though I was forced to allow him to offer himself."

"She will refuse him, Piedra; but what say you to Isodor's words this afternoon?"

"They were ringing words, and prove that the boy is not ignorant of all that is taking place in our land; but I trust he will keep quiet, and not get himself into trouble."

"For the sake of our country, if I believed that, as Captain-General of Cuba, Colonel Morelos would end the tyranny that Spain puts upon us, and would make Estrella a loving husband, I could almost wish that she would become his wife; but alas! it can never be that Spanish and Cuban blood can mingle, I fear; but tell me all that Colonel Morelos knows of our Cuban Leagues, Piedra."

"That he did not say; but he hinted that he knew just what was going on, and more, that he had the names of the ringleaders."

"Oh, my poor husband!"

"Some one has proven a traitor to us, but who, that is the question; now let us await the result of this meeting between Morelos and Estrella, and if she refuses him, then Cubans will have to act promptly."

"But they are not ready."

"Yes, there have been stores and arms landed upon the coast, and we have them hidden away, and we expect General Lopez to make a landing soon, accompanied by several hundred gallant American volunteers; I am daily expecting a messenger from him."

"But if Estrella marries Colonel Morelos?"

"Then, at my request, the repining will end, Lopez will wait a year's time, to know the result, and, pray Heaven, all will be well; but see, there goes Colonel Morelos and Estrella to the

Sea View Arbor," and Don Christobal pointed to where the Spaniard and the Cuban maiden were strolling leisurely along toward the little arbor before referred to.

Upon reaching there Estrella dropped into a seat and fixed her gaze upon the distant sea, in a listless kind of way.

The two had started to play a game of chess, after being left alone, but the heart of neither seemed to be in it, and the colonel had suggested a walk to the arbor, to see the sun set, for it was almost touching the watery horizon.

Without a word Estrella had consented, drawing her long lace veil about her shoulders, and hardly a word had been spoken during the walk thither.

The Spaniard folded his arms upon his broad breast, and stood leaning against the arbor post, forming a stern, but handsome picture, while Estrella drummed the floor with her tiny slipper, and gazed upon the sun, just sinking into the sea.

"Senorita, I have come to Villa Vista this afternoon with my heart in my hand, for I have come to offer it to you."

"My love you have had ever since, long ago in Spain, your father showed me a miniature likeness of his little daughter."

"That image I then placed in my heart, and it was that I might win your love that I begged Queen Isabella of Spain to send me to Cuba, and received from her the assurance that I should be the next captain-general in command."

"Thus you see, fair Estrella, that I will have honor and rank to offer you along with my devoted love."

The Spaniard paused and gazed earnestly at the maiden, whose face had flushed and paled by turns during his words.

Looking up she met his gaze fairly, yet did not flinch, nor was there the slightest quiver in her voice while she said:

"Senor Colonel, I feel proud at having been selected, from among so many Spanish maidens, as the one to whom you offer your heart, hand, fortune and rank."

"If aught that I have said or done, during our short acquaintance, has led you to feel that I cared for you, other than as my father's friend, I am very sorry, for I meant not that it should be so, as I do not love you, I must confess frankly, nor can I ever do so."

"Still, I trust that we can be friends, and that Villa Vista will often welcome you as a guest."

The face of the Spaniard became dark as a thunder-cloud at these words.

He saw his anticipations of riches fade away, and debts in Spain and in Cuba arose like a phalanx of evil spirits before him.

His pride was touched too, for he believed that he had but to offer himself to be eagerly accepted, as he was well aware that many a fair girl would have jumped at the chance to become the Senora Morelos.

"I beg you to reconsider your determination, senorita," he said, hotly.

"One cannot reconsider a question where love is at stake, with a life of wretchedness or happiness to follow, Senor Colonel," was the response.

"You refuse then my love?"

"Having no love to give you in return, senor, I must, in duty to you and to myself, refuse that which you offer."

The Spaniard paced to and fro for an instant, his face livid with anger and emotion.

Then he halted directly before the maiden, and said almost fiercely:

"Senorita Christobal, you are not aware, perhaps, in refusing my offer, what you are doing."

"It is a woman's prerogative, I believe, senor, to accept or refuse an offer of love as it pleases her so to do," was the haughty response.

"Hear me, Estrella Christobal."

"I have offered you my love and all it implies, and I hoped that by becoming my wife, it would end a certain secret revolution now on foot among Cubans."

"You refuse, and, as I am aware of just what Cubans are doing, I must tell you that I shall not only put my heel upon them, but also lead the ringleaders to death."

"I am not to be frightened, Colonel Morelos, into a reconsideration of my decision against you."

"So be it; and I, in turn, will not be swayed by my love for you from punishing the insurrectionists, though the leader be your own father."

"Oh, Mary Mother, have mercy upon me!" groaned Estrella, her face becoming white with fear.

"Ah! you see now that I have power."

"You see now that I offer my love to the leader of the so-called Cuban Patriots here on this island, in the hope that this muinous movement must end.

"Marry me, and it *shall* end, but refuse, and by the powers above, Senorita Christobal, your father walks to the *garote*.

"Such is my threat, and I await my answer from your lips," and the Spaniard folded his arms and confronted the Cuban maiden, into whose heart he had flung his bitter words and cruel threat along with an offer of his love.

CHAPTER V.

THE SECRET LEAGUE.

WHILE Don Christobal and his wife walked down to the little pavilion, or summer-house, upon the pier, after tea, and Colonel Morelos and Estrella sauntered out to the arbor on the hill, Isodor mounted his horse and rode away from the villa.

His face was clouded, wearing a strangely stern look for one so young, and he rode along as though in deep meditation.

Turning into the forest road, he soon after left it by a bridle-path that carried him into the deepest recesses of the rugged hills.

A ride of half a league, and gradually descending the hillside brought him to a wild and desolate spot, where the sluggish waters of a lagoon were crossed by a rude bridge of logs, with no barrier upon either side.

After crossing the bridge, he turned to the right where there was a pathway through the rocks to the water's edge, as though it was a place where horses and game could drink.

Instead of allowing his horse to halt and drink, however, he rode him boldly into the deep stream, and in an instant the animal was swimming.

Turning the horse's head up-stream, Isodor urged him on until a bend in the banks hid him from the view of any one crossing the bridge.

Here the water shallowed perceptibly, and in a short distance the horse found bottom and was wading slowly along in mid-stream.

Thus he continued for several hundred paces, and then the rider headed him shoreward, where a pass was visible between two huge piles of rocks, which nature had cast up in all kinds of wild and fantastic shapes.

The nature of the surrounding country showed that it would have been impossible to have reached that secluded spot in any other way than by the stream, as the foot of man could not have picked its way through jungle and stony clefts.

Passing through the narrow opening in the rocks Isodor came upon a strange scene.

He found himself within a dell, walled in by precipitous rocks, overhanging trees of giant size, brambles and creeping vines.

The dell was a quarter of an acre in size only, and in it were pitched half a dozen tents.

Within these tents were boxes of that peculiar shape and make that indicated that they contained arms.

Kegs of powder, bars of lead, saddles, bridles and military accouterments lay about in profusion, causing the thought that it was a soldiers' camp.

Against one side of the little glen were several boats, lying in a row, with oars and sails near by.

They were of various sizes, from the light canoe to the large yawl of twelve oars.

Seated in the secluded spot, playing cards upon a blanket were four men, while a fifth was busy cooking at a fire and a sixth lay asleep on the grass not far distant.

Within a tent a seventh was visible idly running his hands over the strings of a guitar.

As Isodor rode into the retreat, the men sprung to their feet and hastily laid their hands upon their weapons, for they wore a belt of arms, while the one in the tent threw aside his guitar and hastily approached the youth.

They were a dark-faced, fearless looking set of men, evidently Cubans, and they gathered around Isodor quickly, though showing no hostile act after their eyes had fallen upon him, the man from the tent, who was evidently a leader, saying pleasantly:

"You gave us all a start, Senor Isodor, for we were not expecting you, as there was no league meeting to-night."

"There is a league meeting to-night, Senor Velasquez, as I have ordered it, having important news to make known. I sent two slaves with notes to Ramirez and De Soto, asking them to call the League together to-night, and as soon as it is dark they will begin to arrive."

"That will be soon, Senor Isodor, as the setting sun gilds yonder tree-tops, as you see," and

Velasquez pointed up to the tops of some tall trees that grew upon the cliff above, and which were tinted with the last rays of sunset.

"They will soon begin to arrive, Senor Velasquez, so I will dismount."

"Join us at supper, senor."

"No, thank you, I just partook of supper before leaving home."

"We never begin to cook until late, as smoke is a terrible tell-tale, Senor Isodor, and people might wonder where the fire was that made it; we have breakfast before dawn, eat a cold dinner, and take supper after dark, so you see are careful."

"It is right that you should be, for you have here the equipment of two thousand men, Velasquez, and it cost too much hard work to pull it up here from the bay below, to have it go by carelessness, while your own lives would be instantly the sacrifice of discovery," and Isodor spoke earnestly.

"We know our danger, Senor Isodor; but we risk life to serve our country, as you have done, for it was a gallant thing in you to run out in your yacht and bring her back loaded with these arms; but, senor, have you news of the coming of General Lopez?"

"No, Velasquez, not yet; but I am aware that a traitor is in our midst."

"Ha! do you mean it, senor?"

"I do, for Juan Munez, the son of Major Munez at the fort, told me as a secret that he heard Colonel Morelos and Captain Merida talking about a Cuban having given information of a revolutionary movement being on foot."

"Captain Merida said he could not give the name of the traitor, but he was acting for money, and for a certain sum would betray the secrets of the Cuban League, tell when to expect dispatches regarding a landing, and be the firm ally of Spain."

"The villain!" hissed Velasquez.

"Yes, and I am determined to discover who he is; but I called this meeting to-night to put the League men on their guard, and try and find out the traitor, for Colonel Morelos told Merida to give him the money."

"You have done well, Senor Isodor; but does your father yet know that you are secretly a member of this League?"

"No, Velasquez, and I do not wish him to know until it can be no longer helped, as he would forbid it, as I am but a boy, and perhaps he would send me out of the country."

"Ah! there comes some one, for I hear the splashing of the horses in the water, so you make known what I have told you, for I wish not to be seen just now."

It was now dark, and wood being thrown upon the fire, it lighted up the glen in a weird, picturesque way.

Through the narrow pass in the rocks, out of the stream, rode several horsemen.

They were dressed in white, wore Panama hats, and looked to be just what they were, Cuban planters.

In a short while others came, and at last one rode alone into the glen.

He was a dark-faced young man, with a dissipated, reckless look, and his appearance was by no means prepossessing, did one seek in him a friend.

He was a young planter, and lived with his aged parents some leagues away, and his wild course of gambling and dissipation had brought his father from wealth to almost poverty.

His name was Rafael Ramirez, and his known courage caused him to stand high in the League, and he was talked of as an officer.

At length some twenty stern-faced, earnest men had arrived, and all gathered around the fire, while Velasquez, at the request of Isodor, made known the cause of the meeting, the youth willing to remain in it for some reason he did not explain.

As the words of Velasquez fell upon their ears, the Cubans started and each man faced his comrade with a searching look, for with a traitor in the League he might even then be in their midst, and betrayal meant their instant death by the *garote*.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAITOR.

It was a painful scene, there in that little group in the secret glen, when it was known that there was a traitor in the League, and all felt that even then he might be among them.

From face to face each eye went, and a look of suspicion and indignation commingled was visible upon every countenance.

In a few plain words Velasquez told the story of what he knew, and Isodor was seated in the

background and not known in the matter; he had asked that it should be so.

Velasquez gave no names, but stated it had come direct from a Spanish officer, and that the traitor demanded a large sum in gold, and it had been promised to him, when he should have done one act to prove that he knew what he said he did.

"Now, senors, who is the traitor?" asked Velasquez, in a ringing voice.

All remained silent, and Velasquez continued: "We stand in the eyes of the world as the slaves of Spaniards."

"We have here an island that can be a nation in itself."

"We are not Spaniards, we are Cubans, and the yoke upon us is held there by our masters."

"We are allowed no voice in our Government, and Cuba pays Spain's debts."

"For these reasons we have sought to free ourselves and we have the promise of aid from gallant Americans."

"But, just as all appears well for an uprising, that will unrivet our manacles, we are told that a dog of a traitor is in our midst, and that he would sell us to our masters."

"Can this man be a Cuban?"

"By birth, yes! in heart, no!"

The ringing words of Velasquez were listened to in breathless silence, and again that threatening look passed around the crowd.

"Comrades, we must find this traitor," cried Leon De Soto, a young Cuban planter, who wore in his heart the grief of having loved Estrella Christobal hopelessly.

"Ay, find him; but how?" asked several voices.

Then into the firelight glided Isodor Christobal, and he said quickly:

"Senors, will you allow a boy to raise his voice in your midst?"

All present knew him, and they were aware that he was their equal in every respect, excepting years.

He was recently known to be a member of the League, and, at his request they had kept this knowledge from his father, their chief.

"Yes, yes!"

"Isodor!"

"Speak out!"

Such were the cries that ran around the circle, and thus invited Isodor Christobal said:

"Senors, it was I that brought the Senor Velasquez the news that we had a traitor in our midst."

"How it came to my knowledge, I cannot betray a friend by telling; but it is true, as I can vouch for, painful as it is for me to do so."

"I have tried to find out who this traitor is, and I called this meeting to-night to entrap him."

"I believe that he is in our midst, and I ask you to allow me to take my own way of finding out."

"You shall!"

"Do as you deem best!"

"You are as much a man as any of us, Isodor, though your years are but few."

"Hear him! hear him!"

The different cries went around the circle, and then silence reigned once more, and Isodor resumed:

"My plan to discover the traitor is to search every man present."

All started, and a murmur arose, but what it meant none could say.

"Senors, I demand that the Senor Rafael Ramirez be the first man searched!"

The Cuban thus referred to sprung to his feet, his face livid with rage; but before he could utter a word or act, a pistol gleamed in his face, and Isodor said in a voice that rung out threateningly:

"Move one inch, Senor Ramirez, and your dead body will be searched!"

"Hold, Isodor, Ramirez certainly cannot be the traitor," cried Velasquez.

"He may not be, senor, but all are to be searched, and let him be the first one."

"You shall answer for this, boy," yelled Ramirez.

"Senor, I am wholly at your service as soon as this meeting is over," was the quick retort of the boy.

"Senor Ramirez, you must submit to be searched," said Velasquez, who seemed to feel that some good reason caused Isodor to do as he had.

"I am willing, but let others be searched first," was the indignant reply.

"No, it will hasten matters, I believe, for you to be the first one searched," and Isodor turned to Velasquez, who at once began a thorough search of the man.

From head to foot, for his shoes were taken

if, and his hat-band closely examined, the searchers went, but nothing of a treacherous nature was found upon him.

"Isodor, you have made a sad mistake here," said Velasquez.

"He will find he has to his cost," savagely replied Rafael Ramirez.

Isodor smiled as he responded:

"The search is not over yet, senior."

"What do you mean?" demanded Velasquez.

"Traitors are cunning!"

"Do you mean that he has aught about him that we have not found, Senior Isodor?"

"Search his saddle," was the quiet reply.

The men started and the horse of Rafael Ramirez was led forward.

Instantly the suspected man began to tremble, and he would have sprung upon Isodor had not Velasquez and one other restrained him.

The search of the saddle then was gone through with, and first two bags of gold were found on either side, hidden under the folds of a cloak strapped on behind.

These gold-bags were sealed and the seal was that of Spain, and the mark upon each was \$1,000.

"What does this mean?" cried a voice, sternly.

"I sold some horses to the Spanish quartermaster, and this is my pay," answered Ramirez, and his voice quivered.

"I knew not that you had any horses to sell, as a mortgage rests upon your father's estate," said Leon De Soto sternly.

"Senors, as I came hither this afternoon I saw this man, in conversation with Captain Merida.

"They did not see me, and that is why I suspected Rafael Ramirez, after what I had heard.

"I saw him fasten something to his saddle, and it was doubtless this gold; now see if more cannot be found to prove him to be the traitor, for, if he had had horses to sell to the quartermaster, he would have gone to the fort, and not met a Spanish officer in a ravine miles away."

"Continue the search!" cried Leon De Soto, when Isodor had offered the above explanation, and Velasquez obeying, soon drew forth a bundle of papers.

At sight of them the suspected man bowed his head and groaned, while De Soto unfolded them.

One was a note signed by Captain Merida, and read simply:

"I will meet you with the sum you demand, half an hour before sunset, at the place you designate.

"If you place in my hands the names of the leaders, you shall have the gold, and not otherwise."

"I found that paper in the roadway," shouted Rafael Ramirez, excitedly.

An angry murmur now ran around the crowd, while De Soto cried:

"Did you find this too, Ramirez?"

"See, senors, here is a list of all our League retreats, and just what is stored in them.

"Here are the dates of our regular meetings, and the number of each League.

"Here are the names of each leader, and on this slip the points on the coast where landings are expected to take place.

"Upon this one is marked its value, as you see, as follows:

"'Worth \$2,000,' and it gives the names of the leaders.

"It is just the sum the Senior Rafael has here, and we can but believe that the names of our chiefs are in the Spaniard's hands.

"On each is a value marked, aggregating thirty thousand dollars, and they were to be peddled out one at a time."

"That is just the sum I was told that the traitor demanded to betray us," said Isodor.

"Enough! the traitor is found, and he has so far given the names of our leaders; but we can warn them in time to get them out of the way.

"Velasquez, this gold I turn over to you to go into our fund, and Senior Isodor, the prisoner is in your hands, for we all owe it to you that the *garote* is not now about our necks," and Leon De Soto turned to Isodor, upon whom every eye was now turned, to see what he would say as to the fate of the traitor.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DOOM.

"WELL, Senior Isodor, what is your pleasure regarding this prisoner?" asked Leon De Soto, as the youth made no reply, when he saw that Rafael Ramirez had been turned over to him.

"Senors, in making the report I did, I have but done my duty.

"While Velasquez was telling the story of a traitor in our midst, I sat yonder in the shadow and watched every face.

"All seemed indignant, threatening, suspicious, excepting one.

"That one blanched to the hue of death, and his lips quivered.

"It was Rafael Ramirez, and I felt, after what I had seen, in my ride hither, that he was guilty.

"The Senior De Soto met him, I heard him say, on his way here, and told him of this unexpected meeting, and he turned back with him, and hence the gold and the papers were found in his possession.

"In this list I read the name of my father, of your father, Senior De Soto, and of yourself.

"Also, Velasquez, your name is here, and those of thirteen others, all known to us, and who are our leaders.

"These men would meet death at the hands of the Spaniards, if not forewarned, and for one of our own number to be the traitor, I say that he too is deserving of death.

"I feel sorry for you, Rafael Ramirez, and I deeply regret that your poor old parents are to suffer through you: but your loss will doubtless be their gain, and I am in favor of putting you to death this very night, for delays are dangerous.

All gazed upon the boy, as he spoke, with surprise and admiration, and that there was not one who did not agree with him their faces distinctly showed.

"I too favor your views, Senior Isodor," said De Soto.

"And I," responded Velasquez.

"And I?"

"Death to traitors!"

"Rafael Ramirez, you must die!"

"Hang him up!"

"Lose no time in killing him."

"He must die!"

Such were the angry expressions heard, and Rafael Ramirez felt that his doom was sealed.

He knew that he was guilty, and having sold the lives of others he had no right to expect mercy.

Over head and ears in debt, driven to desperation by his extravagances, he had determined to get a large sum of gold from the Spaniards, and with this blood-money to fly to another land.

But Isodor Christobal, boy though he was, had thwarted him, and now he stood face to face with the comrades he had proven a traitor to.

He dared not ask for mercy, and he dared not look his companions in the face.

"Senors, what say you all? Do you believe this man, Rafael Ramirez, to be guilty of treason?" asked Leon De Soto.

"We do!" cried all as in one voice.

"Do you say that he must die?"

"We do!"

"When?"

"To-night!" again came in chorus.

"How?"

"By the rope!" was almost savagely said.

"So be it, you have spoken," and De Soto turned to the doomed man.

"Rafael Ramirez, you have heard your doom."

"I am not fit to die."

"You must die, so pray for mercy, for within half an hour your career shall end."

"I must see a priest."

"We cannot grant that request, much as we would wish to, for none is near; it would take hours to get one, and besides, this place must be known to no one else."

"Would you have me die like a dog?"

"You should have thought how you were dooming others to death.

"Come, you have just thirty minutes to live, so prepare, if such as you dare pray for mercy.

"Velasquez, bind his hands behind his back, and you must keep his horse here, for his parents must never know how he died."

"Yes, senior."

The traitor was then securely bound.

He uttered no word of supplication now, but stood like a statue, his eyes upon the fire, his lips quivering.

One of the men climbed a tree and passed over a limb the end of a rope, which had a noose in it.

Others stepped to one side, to constitute themselves volunteer executioners, and the other end of the rope was in their hands.

Soon the time passed, fatally soon for the doomed man, and Leon De Soto turned to Isodor and said:

"The time is up."

It seemed agreed that the youth should command the execution, and all eyes now turned upon him.

But he did not flinch, and stepping up to the prisoner, said earnestly:

"Ramirez, in my heart I feel sorry for you, sorry that you should have been so base; but no mercy can be shown you, as your act meant the death of hundreds of noble patriots through treachery, and my own father would have been the first victim.

"From no one here will your poor old parents know the story of how you died, and that you were a traitor.

"Have you aught to say?"

"No, other than that I leave upon Cuba and Cubans my dying curse," was the savage retort.

"So be it; Cuba and Cubans will live under it, Rafael Ramirez.

"Now, Senior Velasquez, lead the prisoner beneath yonder tree and place the noose about his neck."

The order was obeyed in silence.

"Ready all, senors!" called out Isodor.

"All ready!" came the answer from the half-score of men who held the other end of the rope.

"Ramirez, farewell, and may Heaven forgive you in mercy," and Isodor Christobal's voice slightly trembled.

"Cubans, you will rue this day!"

"Mark my words!" shouted the traitor, and he would have said more, when there came the command from Isodor Christobal:

"Up with him, senors!"

High in the air the swaying form was drawn, the rope end was made fast, and, while the body swung to and fro the conspirators rode out of the glen into the stream, and down it to the landing below the bridge before referred to.

Gaining the roadway they separated to return to their homes, and back to the Villa Vista rode Isodor Christobal, his young life already clouded with the cruelties that were forced upon it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHALLENGE.

WHEN Isodor Christobal rode on his way from the secret haunt of the conspirators, he was accompanied by Leon De Soto, who passed near Villa Vista in going to his own plantation.

The young Cuban planter was a favorite with the youth, who had had a lingering hope that his sister would accept him as a visitor.

But Estrella had thought differently, and, though still claiming the young man as a firm friend, had given him to understand that she could not love him.

Bitter was the blow to Leon De Soto, for he loved Estrella deeply; but he was man enough not to spend his days in repining, and accepted friendship where he could not get love.

He was rich, handsome, had been educated in the United States, and was a favorite with all.

"Isodor, it pains me, to feel that the names of our best men are in the hands of the Spaniards, for one does not know when, where and how the blow will fall upon their devoted heads," said Leon De Soto, as the two halted, where the roadway turned off to the young planter's home.

"Senior Leon, I think I have a plan by which they can be gotten out of their hands," was the thoughtful response.

"How mean you, Isodor?" asked De Soto.

"Senior, I cannot tell even you; but I shall risk my life to carry out my plan."

"If there is any risk, Isodor, I must be the one to take it."

"No, senior; I will be the one in this case; but good-night," and Isodor held out his hand, which De Soto firmly grasped, again urging him to allow him to take any dangerous work upon himself.

"No, I must do it," was the low reply, and the two parted.

After he had lost sight of De Soto, Isodor turned back quickly, and urging his horse into a gallop, went on at that pace for half an hour.

Suddenly before him glimmered the lights of a small town, and through the deserted streets he went until he drew rein before a mansion that was brilliantly lighted up.

Dismounting, Isodor approached the door, where a Cuban sat in a chair, evidently acting as attendant.

"Ah! Senior Isodor, I am glad to see you!" said the Cuban, and then he added, in a low tone:

"Any news?"

"We have had a little trouble to-night, Moro, but I cannot say more now.

"Can you tell me if Captain Merida is here to-night?"

"He is, senior; and though he came in with ample gold, he has lost his last dollar, and ordered his horse only a few moments ago to return to the camp."

"When did he come here?"

"Soon after sunset."

"Alone?"
 "Yes."
 "And Colonel Morelos?"
 "Passed through town an hour ago with his escort, on his way to the fort."
 "He did not stop here?"
 "No, señor."
 "Good! and Captain Merida has ordered his horse to return to the fort?"
 "Yes, Señor Isodor, and he will soon be down."
 "I thank you, Moro, and I must ask you not to speak of seeing me here to-night."
 "It shall be as you wish, Señor Isodor."
 "Could you get me a sword, good Moro?"
 "A sword, Señor Isodor?"
 "Yes."
 "There is one in the ante-room, that a Spanish officer left a month ago and never sent for, as he was ordered away from Cuba suddenly."
 "Give me that one."
 Moro stepped into a small ante-room near, and returned with a handsome sword and belt.
 "You will return it, Señor Isodor, in case it should be sent for?"
 "If I should not, Moro, put it down to profit and loss; but are there many Spaniards here to-night?"
 "Only a few, señor."
 "Any of Merida's intimates?"
 "I do not remember having seen any."
 "Any officers of his regiment?"
 "I think not, Señor Isodor."
 "Good-night, Moro, and keep your ears wide open to hear the tocsin of war." And with a light laugh the boy buckled on the sword, mounted his horse and rode on through the town, taking the road that led to the fort a couple of miles beyond.
 The place he had left was a gambling-resort and social club combined, where Cuban planters, rich merchants and Spanish officers were wont to meet by day and night, play cards, have dinner or supper, and enjoy life as best they could.
 Knowing that Captain Merida had a weakness for gambling, and was a constant frequenter of the place, Isodor Christobal had sought him there and with the above result.
 After riding about a mile from the town, Isodor came to a halt and sat upon his horse in calm patience.
 It was not very long before he saw a horseman approaching, and riding at a canter.
 Instantly he rode out of the shadow of the trees on the roadside, and advanced toward him.
 The horseman drew rein to a walk as he caught sight of him, for Spaniards were wont to be on their guard in that country, and soon the two approached near together.
 The moon had risen an hour before, and distinctly revealed the one to the other.
 The young Cuban knew the Spaniard, as he knew Isodor, for Captain Merida had on different occasions been a guest at Villa Vista.
 But Captain Merida seemed in no amiable mood, and said bluntly:
 "It is late, youngster, for you to be out, and this far from home;" and he would have passed on, but Isodor said:
 "I am out on the hunt for game, Señor Captain."
 "What kind of game?" asked Merida, drawing rein and gazing into the youth's face, as he was struck by his manner of speaking.
 "Señor Captain Merida, let me say that I came here to meet you, and one of us must die right here; so draw and defend yourself!" said the Boy Conspirator.
 "Boy, do you mean to insult me?" shouted Captain Merida, flying into a rage.
 "I mean just what I say, Captain Merida—that only one of us shall leave this place alive," was the stern response of the youth.
 "By the queen's crown, but that speech rings!"
 "Ay, and our swords shall ring, too, unless you are a coward!" was the cutting response.
 "Bah! you are mad to think that a Spanish officer would draw his sword to fight a boy."
 "You shall either cross my blade or I shall chastise you as a coward, Captain Merida!" and Isodor raised his riding-whip.
 "By Heaven, but this is too much."
 "Fight me, or you shall have more."
 "You shall be gratified, and when I have disarmed you, I'll lay my whip over your shoulders, boy, for this," and the Spaniard sprung to the ground.
 In an instant Isodor had followed his example, and throwing his bridle rein over a bush near by, he drew the sword which Moro had loaned to him, and confronted his foe.

Captain Merida also hitched his horse, and turned toward the youth, his drawn sword in hand.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUEL BY MOONLIGHT.

It was a strange sight, to see there in the road that Spanish captain, glittering with the splendid uniform he wore, facing a mere boy in years.

Isodor wore a white flannel suit and light slouch hat, and about his waist was buckled the sword belt, the weapon being held firmly in his hand.

Near by, hitched to the bushes, dumb spectators of the scene, were the two horses of the combatants.

Upon one side of the roadway was a field, upon the other a forest, and the moon shed its rays brightly down upon the scene.

Captain Merida was a man of forty, with a stern face, upon which also rested a cruel sneer. He was devoted to gambling and dissipation, and was a severe commander.

Hated by his men, the same hatred was felt for him by the Cubans, while those who were his intimates sought his friendship only from fear of him.

It was said that he had fought a number of deadly duels in Spain, and two young Cubans had been run through the heart by him, in personal meetings, brought on by quarreling over cards.

He had also killed an officer in his regiment in a duello, and being a dead shot and expert swordsman, few cared to face him.

Isodor Christobal knew just what he was, and that he had a dangerous man to face.

One of the Cubans who had fallen by the hand of Captain Merida, Isodor had been greatly attached to, and on several occasions had given the Spaniard a chance of a quarrel with him, which had been utterly ignored.

Now that he knew that Captain Merida had been in communication with Rafael Ramirez, he was assured that he had with him the papers which the traitor had given him.

Those papers contained the name of Don Christobal, De Soto, Alvarez and others, and did the captain report them to the colonel the result would be their death, the youth well knew.

Some months before Isodor had saved the life of a boy, the son of a Spanish major, and the youngster had idolized the young Cuban ever since, and he it was who had secretly told his Cuban comrade of what was going on.

Under these circumstances Isodor Christobal was determined to act, and risk his life to get the papers which Captain Merida had, as he was certain, for he had surely not been back to the regiment, since his meeting with Ramirez, and Moro had told him that Colonel Morelos had not stopped on his way through the town.

"Boy, I know not your cause of quarrel with me, nor do I care what it is; but you Cuban youth are becoming too impertinent of late, and none of them need a lesson more than yourself, so I will give it to you," said Captain Merida, as he held his blade in hand.

"If you can you are welcome to do so, Señor Captain; but I do not fear you," was the quiet reply of the young Cuban.

"I will see that you do before I am done with you, so come, put up your maiden blade if you demand that I cross it with my honored weapon."

"Your dishonored weapon you mean," sneered Isodor, and with a curse of fury the Spaniard sprung toward the boy.

But Isodor met his blade with his own, and the Spaniard uttered another curse as he failed to strike down his guard.

Instantly he saw that he had a swordsman to deal with, even though he was a boy.

He had heard Isodor spoken of as being a superb hand with a blade, but had not expected that he could keep him off.

Finding that he could do so, or at least had, in the few passes they had made together, he pressed him with fervor, determined to at once end the matter.

But Isodor met his every pass, feint and thrust with a skill that was the equal of his own, and the Spaniard was placed upon his mettle.

"Boy, you handle a sword superbly," he said as they both stopped an instant for rest.

"Thank you, Señor Captain, and I can return the compliment," was the provoking response.

"You still dare me," shouted Captain Merida in a rage.

"I do," was the calm response, and instantly the swords flashed again, and so fiercely that

they looked like silver serpents fighting together in the moonlight.

In vain was it that Captain Merida strove to disarm the boy, for he found that he could not do so, and the strength of his youthful antagonist was equal to his own; while he certainly did not appear to be as tired as was the Spaniard.

"Fight for your life, Captain Merida; for I intend to kill you if I can," said Isodor.

"Then shall I kill you, boy," hissed the Spaniard, and he forced the fighting.

But Isodor Christobal was a remarkable hand with the sword, and parrying the thrusts of his enemy, watched for a chance to strike him in return.

It came at last, and catching at it, the youth got under the guard of the Spaniard and drove his sword deep into his body.

A yell of commingled rage and agony broke from Captain Merida's lips, and he sunk to the ground as Isodor withdrew the blade from his heart.

Then bending over the Spaniard, the Young Conspirator hastily searched his pockets and soon drew out a number of papers, and saw that his sword had pierced through them.

Glancing hastily at them he uttered a cry of joy as his eyes fell upon the one he had sought with such determined courage, and thrusting them into his own pocket he sprung upon his horse and rode swiftly back to the town.

Moro was just closing the door of the club rooms as Isodor dashed up and greeted him with respect.

"Here is the sword, Moro, and I thank you for it, for it has rendered me good service."

"Here, do me the kindness to accept this as a souvenir, and rub the blade up, for it has a stain upon it," and Isodor thrust his purse into the man's hand and rode on homeward.

Arriving at Villa Vista the slave who took his horse informed him that the Don was in his library, and requested that he should come there upon his return.

Instantly Isodor obeyed, and entering the elegantly furnished library he found his father pacing to and fro with firm step but thoughtful face.

Isodor was pale, but his nerves were like iron, and there was no indication upon his young and handsome face that he had passed through two fearful ordeals within the past few hours.

CHAPTER X.

FATHER AND SON.

"My son, I have waited up for you," said Don Christobal, in greeting Isodor as he entered the library.

"I am glad that you did, father, as I have much to say to you," was the answer, and Isodor threw himself into an easy-chair.

"You are never out so late, without leaving word that you will be, so we were anxious about you."

"Father, you had some cause to be; but let me make a confession to you, for I feel that I should no longer keep an act of mine secret from you."

"Do you recognize these names?" and Isodor handed to his father the list of names which he had taken from Captain Merida, and which the Spaniard had bought from the treacherous Cuban.

Don Christobal started, for his own name headed the list, and he read there the leaders under him in the Cuban conspiracy against Spain.

"What does this mean, my son?" he asked eagerly.

Isodor arose and went to the window, glancing out upon the moonlit lawn.

Then he walked to the door and looked out into the corridor.

Returning, he drew his chair close to his father's and said:

"It means, father, that I am a member of the Secret League of Velasquez, having joined it without wishing you to know it, as I cared not to give you further cause for trouble."

"It means that I discovered a traitor in our League this afternoon, and he had sold to Captain Merida that paper, with other particulars, which you see there."

"But who is this traitor, Isodor?" asked the Don, deeply affected.

"He was Rafael Ramirez."

"Ha! that man I never suspected, although he was a wild and reckless profligate."

"Father, he is dead," said Isodor impressively, and then he went on to tell of the execution in the glen.

"And these papers, Isodor, how came you with them, if he sold them to Captain Merida?"

"You observe, senor, that they have a hole through them?"

"Yes, made with a sword point it would seem."

"True, sir, it was, and I made it, for, upon knowing the fatal information which Captain Merida had in his possession, I determined to get it from him, so I sought him at the Town Club, found he had not been to the fort after meeting Ramirez, borrowed a sword from Moro, and met him on the way to his quarters."

"I challenged him, and he refusing to meet me, I taunted him until he did so, and the result was that I ran him through and took those papers from his body."

Don Christobal sprung to his feet in utter amazement, and gazed searchingly at his son.

"And this is the one I deemed a boy!"

"Why, Isodor, you have shown yourself the best man of us all; but who knows of your meeting with Captain Merida?"

"Only Moro, senor, though after his death is known our League will doubtless suspect it, or at least Leon De Soto will."

"Moro is as true as steel, and we all know what De Soto is; but this must be held as a dead secret, Isodor."

"Yes, father."

"But you have done a world of good, and the man who would have told who the conspirators were is dead, you say, and we have the damaging papers here."

"I must see that there are no other traitors in our League—ha!" and Don Christobal sprung to his feet in amazement, as he saw Isodor suddenly throw forward his hand and that it grasped a pistol.

As he arose the weapon flashed, and the bullet speeding by the Don, and dangerously near, sunk into the forehead of a man who stood just outside the open window, half-shielded in the shadow of a *gloria-mundi* tree.

"Great God! my son, what have you done?"

"I fired at a man in the uniform of Spain, who had a pistol in his hand and leveled at you, senor."

"Explain to mother and sister the cause of the shot, while I look after the man," and Isodor leaped lightly through the window, out upon the lawn, while Don Christobal hastened into the corridor to meet his wife and daughter, who, alarmed by the shot were hastening to the library.

"Do not tell them what it was, father," cried Isodor, in a hoarse whisper through the window, and stooping he beheld the body of a man lying beneath the ornamental tree.

A pistol was still grasped in his hand, though the bullet wound in the center of the forehead told him that the man was dead.

Hastening to the rear door, where he met several servants, who had been alarmed by the shot, he simply said:

"I was firing at some game that I saw on the lawn, so return to your beds, boys."

With this he entered the house, while the slaves returned to their quarters, their fears at rest.

Entering the library Isodor found his father, mother and sister together, the former having simply stated that Isodor had fired from the library window at a wildcat he had seen out upon the lawn.

"You did wrong to alarm us, my son," said the Senora Christobal reproachfully.

"I never thought, mother, and am sorry that I frightened you; but it is over now, and I hope that your rest will not be longer broken, for it is an hour or more after midnight," said Isodor in the coolest manner possible, and the Senora and Estrella returned to their rooms, the Don saying that he would follow as soon as he had written an important letter he was anxious to send off early on the morrow.

"Well, Isodor, this is certainly a night of strange adventure for you; but did you kill the man?"

"Yes, father, he is dead."

"You saw that he was a Spaniard?"

"Yes, father, and one of Colonel Morelos's escort who was with him this afternoon."

"I know the man as a half-breed, and he has the reputation of being a rascal, and was doubtless left to do some deadly work against you."

"I fear it, for Colonel Morelos was refused by your sister this afternoon, and left in anger, and with a threat of harm, she told me."

"Bravo for my noble sister," cried Isodor with enthusiasm.

"But what is to be done about this dead Spaniard, my son?"

"Father, it is a sad thing that we should have to do deadly work, and hide our deeds

like an assassin; but it would never do to let that body be found here, and I will carry it off in my boat, put weights to it and sink it in the sea, while you can take a hound from the kennel, trail this fellow's steps to where he left his horse and turn the animal loose so that he can return to the fort."

"Thus will we bury the secret of his fate."

"Isodor, you are a treasure, and I will follow your advice," answered the Don, and an hour after the father and son met at the door of the villa, the former having waited there for the boy, whom he saw coming up from the beach.

"Well, Isodor?"

"I took him half a league off-shore, father, and sunk him in twenty fathoms; with rocks that will hold him there," was the quiet answer.

"And I found the Spaniard's horse at the De Soto Plantation gate, and turned him loose in the main road, sending him off in a gallop."

"Then the secret is ours, father; but alas! that Spain's tyranny should force upon us such deeds and dark secrets," and the father and son parted, going to their respective rooms just as the eastern skies grew bright with the coming of day.

CHAPTER XI.

ISODOR'S CONFESSION.

A TREMOR of excitement and dread ran through the community, Spaniards and Cubans alike, when the next day revealed the deeds which the night had hidden.

Captain Merida had been found lying dead by the roadside, and that robbery had not been the cause of his death was evident, as his watch and jewelry were not taken, and his purse contained several gold-pieces.

He had been run through with a sword, that was evident, but whose hands had driven the blade no one could tell.

Then Rafael Ramirez had failed to return home, and no one could be found who had seen him since the day before.

His horse, without saddle or bridle had been found neighing at the gate of the plantation at dawn, and the animal appeared to have been in the water, for his hide and mane even were wet.

Search was at once instituted for the missing man, but his parents had to hide in their hearts the belief that he was dead.

A third cause of excitement was that Colonel Morelos had dispatched one of his escort upon a secret mission, and the horse of the soldier had returned to quarters, but nowhere could the rider be found or aught heard of him.

Spaniards went about with lowering faces, and Cubans looked anxious, for all felt that trouble was brewing.

Colonel Morelos was in a towering rage at the loss of his soldier, and the death of Captain Merida, one of his most trusted officers, and patrols of Spanish troops were sent about the country, guards at the forts were doubled, and an ominous-looking cloud seemed to rest over all.

Serene, yet anxious in heart, Don Christobal remained at home, while Isodor amused himself by sitting upon the shore and shooting waterfowl with his rifle.

While thus engaged he saw some one approaching.

It was Leon De Soto, and the young man soon joined him, and was greeted with a cheerful "Good-afternoon, senor."

Leon De Soto's face was grave, however, and after shaking hands with the youth he said:

"Isodor, I went to the villa, and the Senorita Estrella told me I would find you here."

"Anything new, senor?" innocently asked Isodor.

"You have heard of the death of one of Colonel Morelos's trusted spies?"

"Yes, senor."

"I met him last night, Isodor, after leaving you, coming in this direction."

"You think I can tell you something of him?"

"Yes."

"Go ask the sea," was the significant response, and Isodor pointed out over the waters.

"I understand, for I have heard from your mother how a shot you fired last night alarmed them; but you know also that the horse of Rafael Ramirez escaped from the retreat?"

"Yes, senor."

"I rode there to discover how it happened, and Velasquez told me that he broke his halter in the night and got away; but he did not tell me how Captain Merida lost his life."

"Perhaps he did not know."

"But I do, Isodor."

"You, senor?"

"Yes, and you should have allowed me to have met that man instead of yourself."

"I felt that I ought to do so, and I had half an idea that I could disarm him, in spite of his boasted skill as a swordsman."

"Now you know all, Senor De Soto, for I will tell you that it was a fair duel between us."

"I do not doubt that, Isodor; but I wonder how you could prove the better swordsman against such a foe."

"You got the papers?"

"I did, and father has them with my sword thrust through them."

"Isodor, my word on it you will make your mark in this coming struggle, for before long the war-cloud must burst upon our devoted land."

"I will do all in my power, Senor De Soto, to serve Cuba; but now let us return to the villa, for it is near the supper hour, and you must remain."

"I will then have to hasten away, Isodor, as my mother would be anxious in these troublous times, did I remain out after nightfall; she would conjure up all kinds of evil things," and the two Cubans walked toward the villa.

Don Christobal and the ladies were seated upon the veranda as Isodor and Leon De Soto approached, and the faces of the three wore a serious look, for both the senora and Estrella realized that there was trouble brewing.

Isodor was laughing lightly, and his handsome face showed no sign of the gloom in his young heart.

Tea was soon served and the four exerted themselves to cast off the shadows upon them.

After the meal De Soto took his leave, and Estrella asked Isodor to join her in a walk to the hill-top.

"Brother, do you think that I am blind?" she asked, as the two walked together toward the sea arbor.

"No indeed, sister, not with those beautiful eyes of yours," was the light response.

"In complimenting me, Isodor, you are but praising yourself, for all say we are as like as two peas; but I do not wish to joke now, as the question at hand is too serious."

"What is the question, 'Strella?' asked Isodor.

"Brother!" and she laid her hand gently upon his arm.

"Last evening Colonel Morelos offered me his hand and heart, and I refused him."

"I am glad of that, sister."

"He was angry, spoke in threatening tones, hinted that he had dread secrets against father, and would cause me to rue my casting him off."

"He is not a man to make idle threats, and so I was too worried to sleep last night."

"You were away, too, and I wished to know of your return before I retired."

"Seated at my window, I heard you gallop up, and afterward enter the library."

"I heard distinctly, for both windows were raised, what passed between father and yourself."

"Not wishing to be an eavesdropper, I was turning away when I caught sight of a man dodging from tree to tree and approaching the library window, directly beneath my own."

"It was moonlight, and I saw that he wore the Spanish uniform."

"I at once seized my pistol, and returning to the window beheld him beneath it, in the shadow of the *gloria-mundi* tree."

"I watched him closely, saw that he was gazing in upon you and father, and that he held a pistol in his hand, evidently with an intent to fire."

"I rested my weapon upon the window-sill, to be sure of a true aim, and at that moment heard your shot in the room beneath, and the man dropped dead."

"I saw that he did not move, and hastened to mother's room, but found that she had already run down-stairs."

"I said nothing in doubt of your story, or father's, for mother's sake, but I saw you carry that body to the sea-shore and watched you go out in your skiff and return; and while you were away I beheld father come beneath the window with a grayhound, put him on the man's trail, and go off toward the De Soto plantation."

"Now, brother, what does this mean?"

"I think it means that Colonel Morelos left that man to kill father, that he might have you in his power."

"And the killing of Captain Merida?"

"Sister, I will tell you all, for I can trust you, and I will need your aid," and Isodor made a *confidante* of his sister, telling her all that the reader already is acquainted with.

CHAPTER XII.

FANITA.

SOME four leagues from the Villa Vista there dwelt an old man with his only daughter, and so much like hermits did they live that few persons seemed to know aught regarding them.

The old man was a Cuban, and answered to the name of Fuentes.

He had been a sailor, it was said, and had been wrecked on the coast years before, and would have there met his death had he not been snatched from the waves by a young Indian girl, who dwelt with a small remnant of her tribe in the rugged hills overlooking the sea.

Taken to the camp of her people, the maiden had nursed the sailor back to life, and when, several weeks after, he departed, he promised to return some day and make her his wife.

Soon after a dread epidemic fell upon her people, and one by one they were carried off, until the young girl alone remained, and in her despair she longed to die; but death came not to her, and one afternoon, while she was in her canoe, fishing as was her wont, a trim little craft was seen coming along the coast.

As it drew nearer she recognized her white lover at the helm, and quickly she ran alongside, and was clasped in his strong arms.

He told her that he had come back to keep his word, and that he had bought the little craft, loaded it with all that would make them comfortable, and that he was ready to make her his wife that night.

He dropped anchor in the little bay, near the Indian camp, and the two went on foot to the nearest priest and were united.

Then they set about building a little cabin home in the hills, and facing the sea, and with his gold, for he had plenty, the sailor hired workmen, and it was not long before a cosy little dwelling-place was theirs.

It was situated in a vale, that opened upon the sea, and not far from the deserted camp of the Indian girl's people, and within sight of their graves.

Here the two dwelt in peace and happiness.

They sought no society, and turned a cold shoulder to visitors, while they seemed happy in their own quiet life.

Upon the sea they sailed, in the mountains they hunted, fished in the streams, and in bad weather remained indoors.

They seemed to have no means of subsistence, and yet they lived on the best, the sailor always paid for what he got, and asked no favors or aid of any one.

The result of this union of the mysterious stranger and the Indian maiden was a little daughter, whom all admitted to be very beautiful.

As she grew in years the little Fanita became an expert sailor, no better hunter lived in the mountains, and her father buying for her a pony, she was wont to ride leagues away from home in calm enjoyment of the sport.

She was shy in her nature, yet had a sweet smile of recognition from all.

One day she disappeared, and no one could conjecture what had become of her.

When asked, her parents said that it was their business, not that of other people, and so the matter ended.

But one day the secret came out, when the daughter of a planter came home from school, and said that Fanita was being educated at the convent in Havana.

Several years she remained away, and then was called home to the bedside of her Indian mother, for at last Death had laid his icy hand upon the sailor's loving wife.

Dying, the poor woman was buried by her husband and daughter up in the hills among her people, and the two mourners returned to their desolate home to mourn over their loss.

Bereft of his wife, Fuentes would not allow his daughter to leave him, and thus she grew up to womanhood, as she had in her earlier years, untrammelled and as free as a bird in the mountains.

Don Christobal sought to have her visit Villa Vista, and the senora and Estrella, when they had met her, had urged her to do so; but Fanita firmly but politely declined, and would not enter the house of any one of those who dwelt near.

She seemed not unhappy, but rather to love solitude and the companionship of her father to all else.

One day, when Fanita Fuentes was in her nineteenth year, she was coming along the coast in her little sail canoe, idly lying at ease, when suddenly a huge shark in chase of some game struck it a terrible blow, which stove in the side and caused it to sink.

The shark, wounded by the blow, turned fiercely upon the poor girl, who gave herself up for lost.

But suddenly upon the cliff above, and not a hundred yards away, a man's form appeared in view, and, as the sea monster turned to grasp his victim, a bullet pierced his body, and the maiden escaped being seized in the savage teeth.

At the same instant from the cliff forty feet in height, the man's form descended like an arrow, cut the waters like a knife, disappeared from sight for an instant, and then rising, bravely breasted the waters to the spot where Fanita had sunk from sight, wholly unnerved by the death she had escaped so narrowly.

As she rose to the surface the drowning girl—drowning, for though she could swim like a fish, all power of movement seemed to have left her—was seized in the strong arms of her rescuer, and encouraging words breathed in her ears.

With a bold stroke he swam with her shoreward, glancing ever and anon behind him, for other sharks were visible not far away, and, as she regained her self-control, she released herself from his grasp, and struck bravely out by his side.

Soon they reached the shore, and the two walked together to the cliff above, where the young man regained his rifle.

"You are the Senor Ramirez?" she said, resting her little hand upon his arm.

"Yes, I am Rafael Ramirez," he said with a smile, adding:

"You are Fanita, the Hermit Queen, as they call you?"

"Yes, I am Fanita Fuentes; but I am no queen," she answered simply.

"You are very beautiful, and I am glad it has been in my power to serve you."

"I was hunting along the hills, when I spied your boat, and came down to the cliff to get a good look at you, for I have never been able to get near you before."

"I have seen you hunting in the hills often, when you did not see me, and father told me your name, and that men said you were a bad man, and your life was breaking the hearts of your parents; but you cannot be bad at heart, or you would never have sprung from this dizzy height, and risked your life among the sharks to save me."

"I thank you, Fanita, for your words, and if I have been bad in the past, knowing you will make me change my evil life, so say that I can come sometimes to see you?"

"You can come, yes, though no one else has ever been invited to our house; but I wish my father to thank you for his daughter's life."

"Come soon! good-by," and Fanita walked away homeward, leaving Rafael Ramirez gazing after her with deep admiration in his look.

Six months after the incident just related, the reader has seen Rafael Ramirez die a traitor's death; but in the time he had known Fanita, he had won her love, and when the news came that he had mysteriously disappeared, and that he had doubtless been killed, the young girl set out to solve the mystery, and if he had been slain, to hunt down his murderers, for, kneeling upon her mother's grave she swore revenge.

CHAPTER XIII.

FANITA'S OATH.

THE home of Fuentes, the sailor, was a cosy one.

It was built of logs, had four rooms in it, and a broad covered piazza ran entirely around it, forming a shady retreat in warm weather and a dry one in the wet season.

There was a garden back in the glen, where various vegetables were grown, fruit trees, a chicken-house, with numerous feathered fowl roaming at liberty through the hills, a couple of large cats, and several dogs with savage-looking faces.

Upon the day after the hanging of Rafael Ramirez by the Cuban conspirators, Fanita sat alone upon the piazza engaged in sewing.

She was a beautiful maiden, and her face, though dark, was tinted with health.

Her eyes were large, lustrous and full of fire, while her mouth was very expressive.

She was dressed in pure white, and to a comb in her raven hair was fastened a veil of Spanish lace that fell in graceful folds about her.

Her form was exquisitely molded, and she was indeed a lovely creature, yet with a certain wildness of beauty that one might admire rather than love.

At one side of her lay her two cats fast asleep, and the four or five dogs that watched the place were sleeping under the shade of the trees near by.

Before her the view was of the blue waters of the sea, and upon either side were the sloping hills that formed the valley in which was the cabin.

The windows and doors of the cabin were open, displaying comfort within, and upon all there rested an air of peace and homelike contentment.

"It is near the hour for him to come; but I have not seen him ride around the Black Rock yet, and he said he would come that way," she said, turning her gaze down upon the beach several hundred yards below, where was visible a huge black rock, around which a bridle-path wound.

Suddenly one of the sleeping dogs awoke with a start, and pricking up his ears, uttered a low growl.

Instantly the others started up, and a moment after all of them dashed off toward the forest visible up the glen.

But it was not in a vicious way they went, for they did not bark; and a moment after a man appeared in sight, walking with rapid step toward the cabin.

"It is father; but I never saw him walk so fast."

"He does not even notice his dogs, and I fear something has happened."

"Can aught have happened to Rafael?" and turning pale at the thought Fanita cast aside her sewing and started at a quick pace to meet her father.

He was a man of striking presence.

Tall, broad-shouldered, with a bold face, stern in expression, and eyes that flashed fire, he looked younger than his gray hair and beard indicated.

He was dressed in a suit of gray, of light material, and wore a Panama straw with a broad brim.

Over his right shoulder he carried a stout stick, and swung upon it was a large basket, evidently containing provisions.

"Oh father! has aught happened, for I never saw you walk so fast, or look so stern before?" cried Fanita anxiously, as she joined him.

"Yes, my child, something has happened that will cause you sorrow, for I learned, in the town, where I went to buy our groceries, that Rafael—"

"Oh father! what of him?" gasped the maiden, clasping her hands in a despairing way.

"He left home day before yesterday, and has not since been seen, my child."

"Where did he intend to go, when he left his home?" asked the girl with perfect calmness.

"His father said to Don Christobal's."

"Did he go there?"

"The Don says not."

"And he has not been heard from since?"

"No, but his horse was found at the gate the next morning, without saddle or bridle, and looking as though he had been hard run."

"Then he has been running nearly forty-eight hours?"

"Yes, Fanita."

"Father, Rafael promised to come here this afternoon, and he never yet broke his word to me."

"If he does not come I will know that he is dead."

She spoke with a calmness that was unnatural, and it alarmed her father, for he saw that her eyes were blazing and her face deadly pale.

"My child, Rafael will yet turn up, so do not be alarmed."

"I will wait and see if he comes to-night."

"Suppose he does not?"

"I will then search for him."

"Where?"

"Here, there, everywhere."

"But, my child, I—"

"Father, I will find Rafael if living, or discover if he is really dead."

"Well?"

"If he is dead, and he has been slain, then woe be unto the one who took his life."

"You would surely not seek revenge, for he may have been in the wrong and thus have lost his life."

"It matters not to me, if right or wrong he was slain, he shall be avenged."

"Don't speak so, Fanita."

"Why, father, you do not know your own child if you bid her not to be revengeful."

"You forget that my mother was an Indian, and it was the nature of her race to reap vengeance for wrong done them."

"Ah, Fanita, I have feared all along that harm would come of your loving Rafael Ramirez."

"I never liked him, but I saw that you

loved him, so said nothing; now, if he is dead, you threaten to take vengeance into your own hands against the one who has slain him, and the result will fall heavily upon your young head."

"So be it, father; but I am determined, and I swear, if Rafael has been killed to bitterly avenge him," and the young girl raised her clasped hands on high, as though registering an oath before Heaven.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE THREATENING LETTER.

THE rest of the inmates of Villa Vista, in spite of their passing a sleepless night the one before, was by no means sound, for Senora Christobal was most anxious about her husband, knowing as she did that he had been made chief of the Island conspirators, and this anxiety kept her awake.

Then the Don feared that Isodor might get into some trouble, and the Senorita Estrella was also nervous regarding her brother, and fearful that Colonel Morelos might carry out his threat of harm in some way.

As for Isodor he alone slept well, and was looking fresh and cheerful at breakfast the next morning.

Just as the meal was concluded, Isodor glanced out of the window and said:

"Here comes a Spanish trooper, father."

The Don quietly stepped to the window, while the senora and Estrella turned pale, for the sight of a Spanish uniform now foreboded evil they feared.

Isodor went to the door and met the trooper as he rode up.

He was subaltern of the regiment of Colonel Morelos, and said almost rudely:

"I bear a letter to the Senorita Christobal."

"From Colonel Morelos?" asked Isodor.

"Yes," was the blunt reply.

"Give me the letter and I will hand it to her."

"No, I was told to place it in her hands by my colonel."

The eyes of Isodor flashed; but controlling his anger he said:

"As you cannot go to the Senorita Christobal, and she will not come to you, I will bear it to her."

"You will not."

"Then return with it to your master, and tell him that the Senor Isodor Christobal sends him word to dispatch a less impertinent hireling as bearer of his messages," and Isodor turned upon his heel to re-enter the house, when the soldier called out:

"I meant not to be rude, young senor; but I wish to see the senorita herself, so be good enough to bid her come hither."

Isodor wheeled upon the man and said hotly:

"Fellow, my sister is not one to dance attendance even upon your master, and certainly not upon his servants, so be off, or deliver the letter to me for her."

"You carry your head high, young master; but have a care that you do not get a Spanish heel upon your neck," cried the trooper.

Quick as a flash Isodor thrust his hand into his breast pocket and it returned with a small pistol which instantly covered the heart of the soldier.

"Dog of a Spaniard! Do you dare threaten me in my own house?"

"Be off, sir, or I'll send a bullet through your brain!"

The trooper knew well the reputation which Isodor Christobal had of being a dead-shot, and that his pluck was undaunted.

He saw that he had gone too far, and a coward at heart, he at once cried for mercy, for he dared not return to his chief without having delivered the letter, and the talk among his comrades of late had alone made him insolent, believing that he could be so to a Cuban, and especially a mere boy.

"I beg mercy, senor! for the love of the Virgin, turn that weapon from my breast, for I meant no rudeness," he whined.

"You are a liar as well as a coward."

"Give me that letter!" and Isodor reached out his left hand, while he still held the pistol levelled with his right.

Eagerly the soldier obeyed, handing over a letter bearing the seal of Colonel Morelos.

"I will await an answer, senor."

"You will not; for if there is an answer I will send it by a slave."

"Be off!"

"Yes, senor," and the Spaniard lost no time in riding rapidly away.

"My son, I congratulate you, for you held your temper far better than I could have done," said the Don, coming out upon the piazza.

"Yes, Isodor, I heard all, and I am glad you humbled that impertinent Spaniard; but let me see what has caused Colonel Morelos to write to me?" and Estrella took the letter, and throwing herself upon a cane settee, broke the seal.

Her face first flushed, then paled, and then grew indignant as she read what Colonel Morelos had written.

"Well, sister, what says he, if it is a fair question?" asked Isodor.

"Brother, read it aloud, that father may hear what Colonel Morelos has said," replied Estrella, indignantly.

Isodor took the letter, and read it in his clear voice:

"To the Senorita ESTRELLA CHRISTOBAL, Villa Vista:—"

"SENORITA:—If I address you, after our parting two days ago, it is because I love you—yes, love you too dearly to allow us to be foes, if act of mine can make you my wife."

"I offered my love, and you spurned it; but I am willing to accept you with your scorn, and teach you to love me afterward."

"I beg of you to reconsider your determination to refuse my love, and I urge it from the following reasons."

"You are aware that there are ugly rumors abroad of a Cuban uprising in the land, and I have knowledge of a definite kind that should make me precipitate the difficulty but for my affection for you."

"A spark now would set off the magazine, for Spaniards believe that my dear friend, the lamented Captain Merida, came to his death at the hands of a Cuban."

"Again, Spaniards believe that my faithful guard fell by the hands of a Cuban."

"So believing, Spaniards sleep upon their arms, ready for the encounter whenever the tocsin sounds."

"Now all this tumult can be calmed down, oil can be poured upon the troubled waters, and peace will reign, if it becomes known that you have pledged yourself to become my wife."

"With the high rank of captain-general before me, Cubans will realize, that, as my wife is a Cuban, I will be their friend, and I beg you to say that I can claim your hand, even though you do not now love me."

"I beg you to pause and think of the misery a war must bring upon your country, and which you can avert by a word."

"You are rich now, and have a noble father and brother; but war will sweep your riches away and claim both your father and brother for its victims."

"Ponder then, and return me answer, as I ask, for I have information in my possession that can cause a wail of anguish to go up from scores of Cuban homes before another sun shall set."

"Answer me as I wish and all will be well."

"Refuse, and Heaven help you for the anguish you cause in this beautiful land."

"I await your response with a hoping heart."

"Heaven bless you ever. MORELOS."

CHAPTER XV.

A TRYING ORDEAL.

"WELL, father, what do you think of the letter of Colonel Morelos, and you too, mother, for I see that you have heard it?" and Estrella turned from her father to her mother, the latter having been standing in the open door behind her.

"My child, it is a threat from one end to the other, and the man who seeks to win love by threats gains only hatred instead," earnestly responded the Senora Christobal.

Then Estrella turned to her father, who answered:

"Yes, my child, Colonel Morelos has shown the cloven foot, that appears to be natural to him, and I would not see you allied to that man for my entire fortune, ay, my life."

"And you, brother?" asked the maiden of Isodor, who stood silent and indignant near.

"Sister, before you should marry that man I would kill him, if they led me to the garrote the moment after," was the firm reply.

"Oh that I could believe that by sacrificing myself I could aid poor Cuba, and that that man, as my husband would treat Cubans differently."

"Then would I gladly consent; but I do not believe that it would do any good, for with my fortune, which I believe he is after, he would still be merciless to my poor countrymen, so I will still refuse, still defy him, for, father, I believe he has no such proofs as he intimates, and only says so to frighten me."

"You are right, my child, and I for one would not buy my life at the sacrifice of your happiness," sternly said the Don.

"You must return him his answer at once, Estrella," the senora remarked.

"Yes, and let me be the bearer of it," put in Isodor quickly.

"Ah no, brother, for I know your hot-headed nature would get you into trouble."

"No, sister, upon my word I will not say a thing to anger Colonel Morelos, and will not be insulted by him."

"I would like to visit the fort and camps, to see just what they are doing there, how many troops are in the quarters, or if he has sent any off, and Cubans are not allowed to enter their lines now, and your answer would give me an excuse."

"Can I not go, father?"

The Don was silent an instant and then said:

"I see no harm why Isodor should not go, my child, for he realizes fully how much depends upon him to keep cool just at this time, and my word for it that he will do so," and the Don gave the youth a significant look which Isodor fully understood.

"Then, brother, simply say to Colonel Morelos, that I have seen no reason why I should revoke the answer I gave him when he was here, and his threatening letter does not in the least alarm me."

"Is that all, sister?"

"Is it not enough?"

"Well, it's a great deal more than I would like to have said to me."

"Now I'll be off, and as I have a verbal message for Colonel Morelos, and am but a boy, I guess the guards will allow me to enter the lines," and Isodor laughed lightly, as he went off to prepare for his ride.

Soon he returned, dressed with unusual care, and his best horse True Blue was brought around to the door by a slave, who had great difficulty in curbing the high spirits of the magnificent animal.

"I trust you are armed, my son," whispered the Don.

"Yes, father; but I shall not use my pistols except to save my life," was the low response.

"I will trust you, Isodor," answered the Don, and kissing his hand to his mother and sister the youth sprung into his saddle and True Blue bounded away like an arrow.

So full of life did he feel, and so like him arose his rider's spirits, that ere a slave could open the yard gate, over it with a mighty leap, went True Blue, the daring act causing a cry of alarm from the Don and ladies.

But Isodor turned in his saddle, waved his hand, and went on like the wind.

A ride of half a mile brought him to the park gate, and here he drew rein, for it was closed.

As he opened it and rode through a form suddenly appeared before him.

It was Fanita Fuentes, and knowing her by sight well, Isodor raised his hat.

But she held up her hand to check his advance, and seeing that she wished to speak to him he halted, though with surprise at her act, as he had never before seen a willingness upon her part to talk with him.

"Good-morning, senorita—would you speak with me?" he asked in his courtly way, for the boy possessed elegant manners.

"Yes," was the sharp reply.

"Can I serve you in any way?"

"Yes."

"I am more than willing to do so."

"We shall see."

"You look pale and ill, and it is miles to your home, so I beg you to go to the villa with me, and I will order the carriage to take you to the hills; that is if you do not care to remain as my mother's guest."

"I care not to enter your house; but I was going there to see your father, and I will now ask you what I would him."

"Well, senorita, I am at your service."

"Dismount!"

Isodor sprang lightly to the ground and faced the girl.

"Now tell me where Rafael Ramirez is," and the eyes glared upon him.

Isodor had a nerve of steel, but he had not expected the question, and his face flushed and paled quickly; but he responded on the instant, without a quiver of the voice:

"I have not seen the Senor Ramirez for several days, senorita."

"Where did you see him then?"

A bright idea flashed through the mind of the boy, and he answered:

"I saw him late in the afternoon, as I rode along the Palm Hill Range, talking in the valley below with Captain Merida, the Spaniard."

Fanita started, but said:

"Captain Merida is dead."

"Yes, senorita."

"He was killed."

"So it is said, senorita."

"Run through with a sword, by night, and on the road to his camp."

"So I heard, senorita."

"And since that day Rafael Ramirez has been missing?"

"Yes, senorita."

"This is strange," and the girl spoke more to herself than to the youth.

"It is strange, senorita; and it is a mystery regarding both, as also the death of Colonel Morelos's faithful orderly, who was killed, or rather disappeared, the night that Captain Merida lost his life," and Isodor spoke with a coolness that was remarkable.

For a moment Fanita remained silent, and then said:

"Senor Christobal, I may have been on the wrong track, for I believed that your father knew something about the disappearance of Rafael Ramirez, and what you have said somewhat changes my mind.

"But I am not to be deceived or thrown off my trail, and I tell you that I shall know ere long if Rafael Ramirez be dead or alive, and if dead, who it was that killed him.

"Now you can go, but something tells me we shall meet again."

"It will always be a pleasure to me, senorita," was the gallant reply; and leaping into his saddle again the youth sped on his way, pondering deeply over his meeting with Fanita.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP.

THE meeting of Isodor with Fanita Fuentes certainly gave him food for thought, as he rode on his way.

Her asking him point-blank what had become of a man whom he had seen executed, was a blow and a hard one, but it did not unman him.

Then, too, the name of Captain Merida had been brought up, along with the soldier of the Morelos troop, and he had not quivered in a muscle, at being brought face to face with the acts which he had committed.

Riding on at a brisk pace he soon came to the town, and the first man he saw was Moro, the doorkeeper.

"Ho, Senor Isodor! a fine morning for a gallop," called out the man.

The youth drew rein and answered:

"Yes, Moro; and I am going over to the fort for a short visit."

"No Cubans admitted there now, senor."

"I hope to get in, as I have an important message to Colonel Morelos."

"Any news, senor?"

"Nothing, and have you any?"

"Only that the Spaniards were the only ones at the club last night, not a Cuban being present."

"They fear trouble."

"The Spaniards have had it, Senor Isodor, for the death of Captain Merida was a bitter blow and an alarming one to them."

"Yes, so I have heard," was the nonchalant reply, and then Isodor added:

"If you overhear anything of importance, good Moro, it will be worth your while to send me word to the Villa Plantation."

"I will, senor; but the Spaniards are careful what they say, though they utter threats against the one who killed Captain Merida."

Isodor smiled grimly and with a nod to Moro, rode on his way.

He rode at a walk as he passed the scene of his combat with Captain Merida, and a sigh broke from his lips, while he said:

"How cruel does war make one man toward another; but our cause is just, and I acted for the life of my father and others."

Riding on again rapidly, he soon came to the outer guard at the fort.

He was promptly halted, and the sentry refused to permit him to pass and said that he must await the coming of the relief guard, when word of his being there would be sent to Colonel Morelos.

Isodor was in despair, but just then there rode up a youth, dressed in semi-military costume.

He was Juan Munez, the young son of Major Munez, who was second in command to Colonel Morelos.

The boy loved Isodor as he would a brother, and his sympathy was for the Cubans, and he it was who had given warning that there was a traitor in the conspirators' camp.

He greeted Isodor almost affectionately, and learning that he wished to see Colonel Morelos upon an important matter, said:

"Sentry, I will take the responsibility, so permit the Senor Isodor to pass."

"You know the late orders, Senor Juan?"

"I do, and will abide by the consequences, while I will report to Colonel Morelos just what I have done."

"Pass, senor," said the sentry, politely saluting Juan Munez, and the two youths rode on toward head-quarters.

Though chatting gayly, Isodor's eyes were upon everything as he rode along.

He had often been to the fort and camps, and knew them well.

Now he saw that old guns had been overhauled, the light artillery was parked where it could be made useful at a moment's notice, squads were drilling here and there, and the soldiers had been brought in from the camps and were on duty near the guns.

Ammunition-boxes were being opened, arms put in perfect condition, and the whole scene presented the appearance of a camp upon the eve of battle.

Arriving at head-quarters the Cuban youth was gazed upon with surprise, for, though all knew him, what was he doing there after the strict orders that had been issued?

Colonel Morelos and a number of the officers were absent, however, and the orderly informed Juan that they had gone over on the hill to bury Captain Merida.

"Come, Isodor, you must go with me, for I dare not leave you here, as these fellows look as though they wanted to eat you up," said Juan.

Isodor started, for he had not expected to be forced to attend the funeral of the man whom he had slain; but he was not one to flinch, be the ordeal what it might, and he rode on with Juan Munez, his eyes closely examining the camp as he did so.

Approaching the further end of the camp, the deep roll of a drum fell upon their ears, and they beheld a number of soldiers drawn up at "parade rest."

Out of a small house—the quarters of the late captain—came eight officers, bearing the coffin in which was the body of their comrade.

It was placed upon a gun-carriage, and as the band struck up a dead march the cortege moved slowly away, Colonel Morelos, Major Munez, other officers and a number of Spanish ladies also being in the throng that followed the remains.

"Come, Isodor," said Juan Munez; and, unable to resist, Isodor Christobal found himself in the column following to the grave the man he had slain in that midnight duel by the roadside.

White as death but firm as a rock, Isodor stood the dread ordeal, standing with bowed and uncovered head while the body was lowered into the grave, and then, as the concourse turned away after the funeral rites were over, heaving a sigh that seemed to almost burst his heart.

"Ha! sir, what do you here?" sternly cried Colonel Morelos, as his eyes fell upon the Cuban boy.

"He came with an important message to you, Senor Colonel, and I passed him by the sentinel," quickly said Juan Munez.

"You had no right to disobey orders, Senor Juan."

"No orders were given me to the contrary, Colonel Morelos," was the quick retort of the boy, and the commandante turned to Isodor with:

"Well, Senor Isodor, what is your business with me?"

"You sent a messenger to Villa Vista with a letter, Senor Colonel, and I have come with an answer to it."

"Ah! and you treated my messenger in a most insolent manner for a Cuban to treat a Spaniard."

"Pardon, senor, but you sent an insolent dog as the bearer of a letter to a lady, and I forced him to show politeness where it was due," was the calm response of the Cuban boy.

"If the soldier was insolent he acted upon his own responsibility, and shall be punished."

"He followed the example of his officers toward Cubans, senor; but are you ready to hear the reply to your letter?"

"Yes, give me your sister's response."

"She sent but a verbal response, Senor Colonel, and it is to the effect that the Senorita Christobal sees no reason to revoke her answer to you, when last she saw you, and that your threats do not in the least intimidate her."

The message was delivered in a clear, cutting tone, and the words hit the Spaniard hard.

His face flushed, his brow darkened, and his eyes flashed, as he said:

"So be it, boy; we shall see, we shall see."

"Now, Senor Juan, conduct this haughty young Cuban outside of our lines, and if I catch him within quarter-bounds again, I shall have him arrested."

Isodor bowed coldly, walked to his horse, mounted quietly, and, accompanied by Juan Munez, rode off.

As the two parted in the roadway, beyond the sentry line, the young Spaniard said:

"Isodor, you saved my life, and I shall never forget you for it, nor will I forget the kindness I have received at your home."

"I am no traitor to Spain, but I do feel deeply for Cubans, and I warn you that there will be trouble before long, and some heads will fall."

"More I cannot say, but I beg you not to allow your father and yourself to be caught in any trap."

"Adios!" and Juan Munez rode back into the Spanish camp, while Isodor Christobal went homeward at a sweeping gallop, the coming war-cloud casting its shadow over even his buoyant young breast.

CHAPTER XVII.

COLONEL MORELOS IN A QUANDARY.

IT was the day after Isodor's bold visit to the Spanish head-quarters, that Colonel Morelos was seated in his pleasant rooms at the fort, opening and reading sundry official-looking documents which had just arrived from Cuba.

He had put his spies out in scores, to endeavor to seek information against the Cubans, for the death of Captain Merida had left him completely in the lurch.

The captain had kept him posted of his recent correspondence with a Cuban traitor, and his offers to sell out his comrades for a large sum.

But Captain Merida had not told him who that Cuban was, as he had not known himself until at last an interview had been appointed.

Upon hearing of this letter of appointment, Colonel Morelos had ordered the paymaster to turn over to the captain three thousand in gold, the price which it was said the Cuban traitor demanded; but herein Captain Merida had feathered his own nest, and laid aside for his own special use one thousand dollars, which just then he was sadly in need of.

The other two thousand he had carried with him to the place of rendezvous, and to his surprise he had discovered Rafael Ramirez to be the traitor Cuban.

He was confident then that Ramirez could give him most important information, but the Cuban held his price high, told him he could give him points upon various matters, but that he had a sum set upon each.

He informed him that he could tell him the hiding-places of the League, the amount of arms collected in each, the number of men there, where stores had been landed, when munitions of war were again to be landed, at what time General Narciso Lopez would make a landing with a force of volunteer Americans, and last, just who the leaders in Cuba were.

For all this information, and upon each separately, Rafael Ramirez demanded certain sums, and Captain Merida pledged them to him, paying two thousand down for the list of Cuban leaders, and promising on a certain date to pay over the entire amount, when the traitor would have all his papers, maps and data ready to deliver to the Spaniards.

This much the colonel was aware of, and he anxiously awaited the result of the interview between Captain Merida and the Cuban, and learned with chagrin that death had silenced his officer's lips forever.

A search of the captain's body revealed that he had not been robbed of his watch, jewelry, or purse, but no papers were found upon him.

What it meant Colonel Morelos could not conjecture.

The money he had paid over to the captain was missing; but Colonel Morelos was in the dark as to whether he had seen the Cuban, gotten any information from him, or what had happened.

He did not connect the disappearance of Rafael Ramirez, or the missing of his faithful spy with the death of Merida and was in a quandary.

He had dispatched the captain on a mission and death had overtaken him.

He had left his spy behind, to do a fiendish act, for the colonel had argued:

"With Don Christobal out of the way, the daughter will not dare refuse me!"

He had told his spy that Don Christobal was inciting an insurrection, and that he did not wish to arrest him and publicly have to execute him, as it would get the Cubans up in arms, so that it would be well to quietly get rid of him.

The soldier was encouraged in his deadly work from the fact that he had been a villain all his life, would stand well with his colonel, and more, receive a snug little sum of gold, in return for what his leaden bullet accomplished.

"It must be a dead secret between us," said the colonel, when he parted with his paid assassin.

"It shall be, Senor Colonel," was the answer,

and a dead secret it was, as the reader has seen.

All these things put Colonel Morelos in a quandary, and having failed through Captain Merida and his assassin to gain his points, and been so promptly refused by Estrella Christobal he was in no amiable mood, and his officers felt it, suffering accordingly.

He had left debts in Spain that must be paid, and there were debts in Havana still more pressing.

To pay them he had determined to invest in a wife, but the one chosen said nay, and that speculation failed.

"There is but one way out of my difficulties," he muttered, as he sat alone in his quarters.

"And that is to precipitate a war here.

"It may be nonsense, after all, that the Cubans are preparing to rise; but they can be readily driven to it, and I shall drive them.

"Once the war breaks out, and I will win a name that will keep my creditors at bay, while I can get enough money in ransoms from these wealthy Cubans to pay all I owe, while the Queen will make me captain-general surely, if I make a grand reputation here."

"Now to light the match that must set off this magazine of Cuban conspiracy!

"Well, Senor Juan, would you see me?" and Colonel Morelos turned to Juan Munez, who just then entered his room, the boy being a privileged character in camp.

"Senor Colonel, I met a woman just now, up on the highway, who begs to see you."

"I care to see no women!"

"She's very beautiful, senor."

"Ha! a Spaniard?"

"No, Senor Colonel."

"A Cuban, then?"

"Yes, senor."

"Who is she—or do you know her?"

"She is known by the name of Fanita Fuentes."

"Ah! that beautiful, mysterious girl?"

"Yes, senor."

"And she wishes to see me?"

"Yes, senor."

"Are you aware of what she wants?"

"She would not communicate her errand to me, Senor Colonel, so I rode on to tell you."

"I will see her," said the colonel thoughtfully, and Juan answered:

"I will go after her then, Senor Colonel," and the youth departed.

In half an hour he returned, and he was accompanied by Fanita Fuentes, looking weirdly beautiful with her flushed face and flaming eyes.

"Now, senor, thanking you, I will excuse you," and she turned to Juan, who bowed and retreated, though with evident reluctance.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FANITA'S REVENGE.

THE cool manner of Fanita Fuentes, as she was ushered before him, almost disconcerted even the stern Colonel Morelos.

He had heard much of the strange maiden, and on several occasions had seen her, and been struck with her beauty.

He was well aware that she shunned every one, and that few dared to speak to her, and he could not account for her coming to see him.

He felt flattered at first thought, and then a dread came over him that she had perhaps come to take his life.

She was certainly very beautiful, as she stood there before him, and very haughty.

She wore a close-fitting riding-habit, a soft hat with a black plume and gauntlet gloves.

In one hand she held a riding-whip, and the other was thrust into her dress in a nonchalant kind of way; but whether the fingers were toying with a pistol Colonel Morelos could only guess.

"Be seated, senorita, and it will be my pleasure to serve you in any way that I can," and Colonel Morelos appeared very gracious.

Fanita bowed, and seated herself in silence, while it suddenly flashed across the mind of the Spaniard, that she might be the one with whom Captain Merida had had the secret correspondence.

"If she is the traitor, then I will know all," he muttered, while he drew his chair nearer to the fair Cuban.

"Now, senorita, I am ready to hear you," he said.

"Have your walls ears, Senor Colonel?" was the quiet question.

"Ah! I understand you," and the colonel walked into the adjoining rooms, and then stepped to the door where a sentinel was pacing to and fro.

"Sentinel, march twenty steps in front of the door and continue your pace there," he ordered. The sentinel promptly obeyed.

"Now, senorita, I am your humble servant," and Colonel Morelos returned to his chair.

"Senor Colonel, I am but a poor girl, dwelling with my old father on the hills; but I have come to you, hoping that you can give me the information that I seek, and in return I will tell you that which will be of interest to you."

"You have but to speak, senorita, for me to serve you."

"Do you know Rafael Ramirez?" bluntly came the question.

"I do, or I did know him, if he is now dead, as I have heard."

"Do you believe that he is dead?"

"I hardly know; but to say the least his mysterious disappearance would lead one to so believe."

"Upon the same night one of your soldiers met his death?"

"He disappeared as mysteriously as did Rafael Ramirez, and I believe that he is dead."

"You do not know how he could have died?"

"I can surmise, as he was upon special duty for me; but I cannot tell just how, though I hope to find out."

"And Captain Merida also lost his life upon that same night?"

"Yes, senorita."

"Was he upon special duty for you at the time?"

"Well, I may say yes; or he had been."

"With whom?"

"Senorita, you are a close questioner, and yet I feel that you have come here for some good purpose, so if you will be frank, you will find me equally so."

"Senor, let me say then, in all confidence to you, that I was pledged to become the wife of Rafael Ramirez."

"Indeed? He was to be envied."

Without paying any attention to the colonel's gallantry, Fanita continued:

"He made an engagement to come to my home on the afternoon, after the day upon which he had last been seen; but alas! he never came."

"We were to have been secretly married in a short time, and leave Cuba with my father, for America, and afterward his parents were to follow him, for he had an opportunity of getting a large sum of money, which would make us all comfortable in the United States, and my father is by no means destitute."

"He expected to receive this money within two weeks after our last meeting, and I have come to you to know if he got it?"

"To me, senorita?" cried Colonel Morelos in amazement.

"Yes, senor, for it was from you that he expected to get it, as I know."

"From me?" and the colonel sprung to his feet and paced to and fro.

Then a light seemed to break in upon him, and he said quickly:

"Senorita, I think I understand you now, for, though I was not in secret correspondence with a certain Cuban, my friend and aide, Captain Merida was, and it was upon the afternoon prior to his death, that he went to meet this person, who, for certain sums was to give us information of value."

"The first payment was to have been made that afternoon, and if the data proved correct, the balance was to be paid over within a stated time."

"That Merida went to keep his appointment I know, and he had the gold with him to pay our informer; now let us see if your lover was the man," and Colonel Morelos stepped to his private desk and took out a slip of paper.

"Do you know this writing, senorita?"

"Ah! it is Rafael's, though he has attempted to disguise it."

"Then, senorita, Rafael Ramirez was our man, and as he and Merida both lost their lives the same night, it looks as though there had been underhand work."

"There has been, Senor Colonel, and it is to unravel it that I came here to see you."

"I will aid you all in my power; so let us decide what is best to be done first."

"Captain Merida and the Senor Rafael met as by agreement, senor."

"You know this?"

"I do."

"Well?"

"They then parted, for I visited the place where they met, and saw the tracks of their horses going to and from there."

"The captain rode toward the town, while the Senor Rafael went toward the Bandit Hills,

and after turning into the main road I lost the tracks of his horse."

"You have done well, senorita, to discover that much."

"I can now, with your aid, discover more."

"Did you find any papers upon the body of Captain Merida?"

"No."

"Yet his purse and jewelry were not touched?"

"Nothing was taken."

"Except the papers."

"What papers?"

"Those he got from the Senor Rafael."

"Ha! you are a born detective, senorita, for now I see that Merida must have gotten certain papers from the Cuban, and not having them on his body, they were, of course, not only taken from him, but the one who killed him did so to get them."

"That is the case in my mind, Senor Colonel."

"It was some one who knew that the Senor Rafael had sold them to Captain Merida, and therefore met him on the highway and demanded them."

"By all means; but it is strange that any one could defeat Merida, as he has no superior in the Spanish army, and I remember that his sword was found clasped firmly in his hand, showing that he had been engaged in a personal encounter; but surely there must have been others against him."

"No, Senor Colonel, there was but one."

"How know you this?"

"I examined closely the tracks, on the scene of combat, and saw where one horseman had remained concealed in the shadow of the trees, awaiting the coming of the Spanish officer."

"Then, to trees near by but two horses were hitched, and one of them, the one whose rider killed the Spanish captain, took the road back to the town, from whence he had come."

"Senorita, you follow trails as well as do the American Indians I have read and heard so much of."

"I have been taught to follow trails from my childhood, Senor Colonel; but let me tell you that I can give you the information which poor Rafael gave to Captain Merida."

"By the Cross! but can you do this, senorita?" cried Colonel Morelos excitedly.

"I can, senor."

"And will?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"Whether you agree to my terms?"

"Name them, senorita."

"First let me say that it was when on a visit to me that Rafael wrote down all the information which he meant to give in detail to you, through Captain Merida."

"As he went over it several times, scratching out and adding here and there, he made a fresh copy, and left with me the first one, and that one I have."

"And it gives much valuable information, doubtless, senorita?"

"It gives the names of the Cuban conspirator chiefs, the secret haunts, the members enrolled, the hiding-place of their munitions of war, and where the next landing of men and arms will take place."

"You have but to name your price, senorita, and it shall be paid to you," said Colonel Morelos with enthusiasm.

"Senor Colonel Morelos, my price is that you garote the murderer of Rafael Ramirez," was the calm reply.

"But, senorita, he is unknown to me."

"Colonel Morelos, who killed Rafael Ramirez is not the question, for he, or they, but obeyed orders from the chief."

"That chief's name I have here, with others, and if you will pledge me your word that he dies, then will I give you the information which you desire, for I am revengeful, and mean to make others feel as well as myself."

"I will gladly give you the pledge, senorita."

"Then, Senor Colonel, the man whom you are to arrest and execute is Don Piedra Christobal," came in cold, sinister tones from the lips of the revengeful woman.

CHAPTER XIX.

A TIMELY WARNING.

In the library of Villa Vista upon the evening following the strange interview between Fanita Fuentes and Colonel Morelos, sat Don Christobal and his family.

The Don was talking in a low tone, and his face wore an anxious look, for the situation of affairs looked threatening for the Cubans, as they had hoped to catch the Spaniards off their guard.

Though the papers sold to Captain Merida by Rafael Ramirez had been secured by Isodor, it was very certain that his treacherous correspondence with the Spaniards had put them on their guard, causing them to be prepared for an uprising.

"I wish, wife, that you would sail in the yacht, with Isodor and Estrella, and seek the American shores, where you could establish yourselves in a pleasant home until this trouble has blown over and Cuba is free."

"You could take with you a few of the house servants, and the crew of the yacht, and Isodor is certainly a good sailor and would be invaluable to you in many ways."

"And leave you here, Piedra?" asked the Senora Christobal sadly.

"My duty calls me here, my wife, as you know I must sink or swim with our loved land."

"Mother, I think we should remain with father," quietly said Estrella.

"Yes, my child, we will not fly to safety and leave your father here to face the worst of dangers— Oh! there is the sound of hoofs upon the gravel outside."

Isodor hastily left the room, and a moment after he re-entered, accompanied by Juan Munez.

The boy looked pale and anxious, as he entered the library, and said quickly, after bowing to all.

"Don Christobal, do not think me a traitor to Spain because I come to serve you; but I cannot see that my country will be benefited by your death, and I have come to save you."

"My dear boy, what can you mean?" said the Don quietly.

"I have ridden here to-night, senor, to tell you that I overheard a plot between Colonel Morelos and one other to arrest you to-morrow, and to have you garoted before sunset."

"You are accused of being the chief of a League of Cuban conspirators, and you are to be executed without trial, so for Heaven's sake make your escape, for no mercy will be shown you."

"More I cannot, dare not say, except that your plans are known, and that a vessel, expected off the coast to-morrow night, with arms for you Cubans, will be allowed to land her cargo, which will then be seized by a regiment of Spaniards in ambush, while a cruiser has been sent for to run down and capture your craft while she is in the little bay."

"Now, senor, I must be off, for I believe they would kill me if they knew I betrayed their secret; but I implore you to fly, all of you."

The boy had spoken rapidly, but distinctly, and his words caused the senora and Estrella to turn deadly pale.

But Don Christobal never moved a muscle, and Isodor was as calm as his father.

"My noble, brave young friend, I thank you, and may Heaven bless you through life for this act, which I know is prompted by your friendship for my son."

"Do not, senor, neglect my warning, I pray you," urged Juan, anxiously.

"I will not, I promise you; but do not delay here, as you may be missed and get into trouble."

"Farewell," and Don Christobal seized the boy's hand, while the Senora Christobal sprang forward and with deep emotion thanked him.

Hastily saying farewell Juan Munez then left the library, accompanied by Isodor, and mounting his horse, which he had hitched to the piazza railing, he grasped the Cuban's hand in parting, and rode rapidly away in the darkness.

Returning to the library Isodor found his mother and sister in tears, and that his father had refused to leave Cuba, while insisting that they should do so.

"Isodor, you must at once get the yacht in readiness to sail, and then return with her crew, to carry the baggage on board, for your mother and sister can get ready in an hour or so."

"But, father—"

"Listen to me, my son, for I give you a command as your chief, knowing as I now do that you are a member of the Conspirators' League."

"The vessel that young Munez speaks of, is due now, and she comes from Mobile, and carries a most valuable cargo of munitions of war and stores."

"General Lopez himself may be on board of her, and she was to put into the bay, where the boats could take the cargo up to the Velasquez Retreat."

"This vessel must not be taken, and you can save her, for the yacht is very fast, and knowing the course she is coming on, you can head her off."

"I will write a letter to her commander, giv-

ing him another place of landing, and you can explain to him just how matters stand."

"If General Lopez is on board say to him that our League is ready to support him when he lands."

"And you, father?"

"I shall, as soon as you set sail, ride at once to Velasquez's Retreat and wait there for future developments."

"But, father, may not the one who has betrayed us in some things betray in all, and the retreats be also known?"

"True, my son, and I will act upon that wise suggestion of yours, and order all of the League to retreat to the mountains, there to await the coming of General Lopez."

"You will not go with us, Piedra?" asked the senora, in a voice that trembled with emotion.

"Would you have me desert my country and her patriots in the moment that danger threatens?" reproachfully asked the Don.

"No! no! no! You must remain, Piedra; but would to God we could also do so."

"It is best that you go, and when you return may it be to see Cuba no longer under Spanish rule. But you must not delay a moment, for there is much to be done, so call the servants and let them believe we are going to Havana for a visit, for though I believe our slaves faithful, there may be some traitors among them."

Isodor now hastened to call the yacht's crew and go on board to get her ready for the cruise, while his mother and sister packed up their valuables and all else that they were to carry with them.

The Don busied himself in looking over his papers, and making a bundle of such as he wished to take to the retreat with him, and preparing to desert his beautiful home to hide like a hunted animal in the mountains.

Thus two hours passed away, and Isodor appeared, accompanied by his crew of six negroes.

"I have put on board all necessary stores, father, and the Cloud is in perfect trim," he said.

The black sailors then shouldered the luggage piled up in the front hall, and quickly bore it down to the little pier, when it was put on board the Cloud, which lay moored alongside.

Then the Don and his wife followed, with Isodor and Estrella, and bringing up the rear were four negroes who were to accompany their mistress, yet little dreamed that they were going further than on a cruise to Havana, where they quite often went.

They wondered at so much baggage being taken, but made no comment thereon and went on board in silence.

In the cabin of the yacht the farewells were said between Don Christobal and those who were so dear to him, then Isodor gave the order to cast off, and the swift craft sped away under a four-knot breeze just as the bell in the plantation chapel tolled out dismally the hour of midnight.

Each echo seemed to resound like a death-knell in the heart of Don Christobal, as he stood upon the pier watching the receding yacht.

"I will watch her white sails until she rounds yonder point, and then I will return to the villa, leave the overseer in charge, and mounting my horse, ride to the mountains, where I am to be a fugitive until the time comes to strike our blow for freedom."

So muttered Don Christobal, unmindful that dark forms were creeping up behind him.

Nearer and nearer they drew, and the rising moon glittered upon the uniforms of Spanish soldiers.

Nearer and nearer, and then the yacht rounded the point and her white sails disappeared from view.

"Farewell! farewell!" broke from the lips of Don Christobal, and with a wave of his hand after the receding vessel, he turned with a sigh to go to the Villa, when clear and sharp came the words:

"Don Christobal, you are a prisoner of Spain!"

"Move, and you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER XX.

ISODOR'S VENTURE.

LITTLE dreaming that Don Christobal had fallen into the hands of his foes, and hoping for the best, the senora and Estrella sat upon the deck of the yacht, enjoying the moonlit scene and talking with Isodor.

Under his captaincy, the mother and sister of the youth felt no dread, for they knew he was a good navigator and thorough sailor, while the crew of the Cloud were all fine seamen.

"Where will you search for the coming vessel, my son?" asked the Senora Christobal.

"I shall stand off from the coast until dawn,

mother, and then cruise off and on all day, running back again toward night, so that the vessel cannot get in under cover of the darkness without our sighting her."

"I trust we may not miss her," answered the senora, and bidding her children good-night she retired to the cabin.

"Isodor, do you know I feel very blue at leaving father behind us," said Estrella, soon after her mother disappeared.

"The same feeling oppresses me, sister, and I hope it is not a presentiment of evil."

"If he should be taken and executed, brother, it would kill your mother, and then—"

"Then I would have both our mother and father to avenge," fiercely said Isodor.

Estrella shuddered, but remained silent, while after a moment Isodor said:

"Sister, I am revengeful against our rulers, after all they have made Cubans suffer, and if they should take father's life by cruelly putting him to death, I would avenge him, I swear it."

"If he is killed in battle it is different; but woe be unto Colonel Cazandra Morelos if he causes father to die by the *garote*."

"And, sister, after you and mother are comfortably settled in the United States, I intend to run back to Cuba."

"Isodor!"

"I mean it, sister, for I shall load the yacht with what is most needed, get together a party of brave Americans, and run back to aid our fellow-patriots in the struggle."

"Isodor, it is noble of you to say so; but I fear mother would never consent to your going."

"Oh, yes, she would, for she is a brave woman, and has given up father to the cause, and you will be with her, so I am decided to return."

"You know best, Isodor; but we will not speak more of it just now; but see, is not that a sail that glimmers yonder in the moonlight?" and Estrella pointed several points off the yacht's starboard bow.

"It certainly is, and a brig at that, and that is the kind of vessel we are to look for."

"I hope it is not a Spaniard."

"I do not mind if it is, for the conspirators have not yet made their blow for freedom, and a Spanish vessel would not harm us even though we are Cubans."

"See! the brig rises rapidly, and I will alter our course so as to run near."

In half an hour the strange sail was but half a mile distant, and examining her closely through his glass, Isodor said:

"Sister, that is just such a vessel as the one father described, so I will give the signals which she was to exchange with the shore, and we will soon know."

A blue and red lantern were then brought to the youth by one of the crew, and taking one in each hand he whirled one and then the other rapidly around his head.

A moment after a white and a green light were put through the same maneuvers on board the brig.

"Bravo! it is the brig, and we have saved her," cried Isodor, and the yacht was headed directly for the stranger.

The brig luffed up as the little vessel approached and lay to, and Isodor hailed as he ran down under the stern of the stranger.

"Ho, the brig ahoy!"

"Ahoy! what *carrera* is that?"

"The Cloud, Don Christobal, commander," responded Isodor.

"Ay, ay, I'll send a boat on board of you," was called back from the brig.

"What brig is that?" cried Isodor.

"The American brig Conspirator," was the answer.

"Buena!" shouted Isodor, and a few moments after he met the boat at the gangway, and grasped the hand of the officer who sprang on board the yacht.

"Are you here as a dispatch craft?" asked the officer.

"Yes, senor, I am here to warn you; but I would see General Lopez if he is on the brig."

"The general is on the brig, and you had better return with me."

Isodor entered the boat with the officer, and soon after found himself face to face with a man with a dark countenance full of resolution and power.

It was General Narciso Lopez,* who, upon learning that Isodor was the son of his old friend and compatriot, Don Christobal, welcomed him warmly.

* Garoted in Havana in 1851, two years after the meeting with Isodor.—THE AUTHOR.

"I have a valuable cargo here, Senor Isodor, which you have saved, not to speak of the lives of some three-score gallant fellows who would have walked into the Spaniards' trap but for you."

"I will see that you are not forgotten, if Cuba shakes off her fetters, for your act is deserving of the highest praise and our warmest gratitude," said General Lopez warmly.

He then read the letter of the Don, appointing another place of landing for the brig, and, as Isodor told him that he intended returning to the island in the yacht, he gave him letters to the Cuban *Junta* then in New Orleans, asking them to return dispatches by the brave boy, and to trust him as they would themselves.

Having had a long conversation with General Lopez, and telling him just how matters stood in Cuba, the force of the Spaniards and all that it was important for him to know, Isodor Christobal returned on board his *carrera*, and the two vessels parted just before dawn, the yacht holding on her way for Mobile, and the brig hauling off-shore, to await the coming of night, when she could approach the other landing-place appointed by the Don, unsuspected and unseen.

The yacht of Isodor was a craft of sixty tons, of the class known in Cuban waters as a *goleta*.

She was of trim build, very fast, carried clouds of canvas, and had a large and comfortable cabin, for Don Christobal had had her built as a pleasure craft to run to Havana and back, and to make short voyages in along the coast.

Not only did Isodor understand the management of her, but Estrella was also an expert sailor, and the crew had been reared on the waters adjacent to the island.

Having performed this duty that his father had expected of him, Isodor headed for Mobile with a happy heart, and after a rapid run ran into the harbor and dropped anchor.

Leaving his mother and sister on board, the youth went on shore, accompanied by Bueno, his faithful *valet* and companion, and at once sought out a pleasant little home in the environs of the city.

He found one to his taste, fully furnished, rented it, and returned for his mother and sister, and that very evening they were comfortably settled in their new home, the well-trained servants going about their duties as though they had known no change from the plantation villa.

Thus some weeks passed away, and Isodor seemed to be constantly busy, remaining away from home often several days at a time, and when with his mother and sister seeming ill at ease.

Word came to them through the mails of trouble in Cuba, that there had been an uprising of the patriots, and several battles had occurred; but nothing was said of the landing of Lopez and his men.

One day Isodor left on a run across the lakes to New Orleans, and it was nearly a week before he returned.

His face wore a stern, determined look, and he said:

"Mother, I am ordered to Cuba, as a bearer of dispatches, and will also carry out in the yacht arms and the munitions of war, together with some two-score men, Cubans and Americans, who go to join the army there."

"Oh, my son, must I give you up too?—for something tells me that I shall never see your father again," moaned the unhappy woman.

"Mother, I must do my duty by Cuba, boy as I am, and my yacht is just what the *Junta* needs as a dispatch-boat."

"Besides, I am not to join the army there, but will do duty as a messenger, and carry cargoes for the Patriots."

"Also, mother, I am anxious to know just what has happened there, to see dear father, and to learn the fate of Cespedes, for since we parted from his brig nothing has been heard of him."

"I yield my love, my feelings, Isodor, to the cause of Cuba, and bid you God speed," was the brave reply, and that night Isodor, the Young Conspirator, set sail for the Ever Faithful Isle, his yacht bearing a precious cargo and two-score of gallant Patriots.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CRUISE OF THE CLOUD.

UPON the Cloud, on its run to Cuba, went a Cuban high in rank, with several *aides*, and an escort of thirty gallant soldiers.

Then there was on board medicine for the hospitals, several skilled surgeons for the field, uniforms, small-arms and ammunition.

Dispatches for the chiefs, and letters for the Patriots the Cloud also bore, and no boy ever

bore a heavier burden of peril and confidence, as commander of the craft, than was put upon the young shoulders of Isodor Christobal.

When the officers came on board the yacht, running out from New Orleans in a schooner, and meeting her off the Chandeleurs at a given time, they were amazed at finding a mere youth in command.

But they knew Don Christobal well, and did not doubt if the son was like the father, he was worthy of the confidence placed in him.

It was a bright moonlight night, when the schooner and the yacht sighted each other, signals were exchanged, and soon after, under the lee of one of the islands the two vessels lay side by side, the lubberly merchant craft rapidly transferring to the graceful Cloud the valuable freight she carried.

As the two vessels swung apart, the chartered schooner to return to New Orleans, and the yacht to go on her perilous voyage, there suddenly shot into view around an island a schooner-of-war.

At a glance Isodor recognized her as a United States cutter he had seen lying in Mobile Bay, and which had twice sent a boat aboard the Cloud to inquire into her being there in strange waters.

"We have to run for it, for if she catches us all is lost," he cried, and under his energetic orders the negro crew sprang to their posts, and the yacht was covered with canvas.

The schooner-of-war was half a league away, and had evidently known that the yacht and schooner were lying under the lee of the island, having slipped up on them, by towing under bare poles so that her sails would not be seen.

As she came into view she was rapidly setting sail, and by the time the Cloud had all of her canvas drawing, she was covered from deck to truck, and in hot chase.

The merchant schooner had meantime spread all sail, and her frightened captain was running away as fast as his lubberly craft could go.

But the war-vessel did not care for the schooner, as it was the yacht she was after, and this was made very evident as a red flash came from her bows, and a shot went flying over the Cloud's deck.

"They are in earnest: but we will see if the Cloud cannot run away from them," calmly remarked Isodor, and he took the helm himself, placed his black crew in the most advantageous positions, where they could watch every halyard and sail, and ordered the soldier passengers far up to windward to keep her on as level a keel as possible.

Finding that the yacht did not obey the first summons to come to, a second shot was fired from the schooner.

But this did no damage, and was not noticed, as the American cutter desired, so that the firing now became rapid from her bow chasers.

A shot struck the taffrail here, another cut through a sail, a third splintered a spar, a fourth tore through the bulwarks, and a fifth killed two men, while several more were wounded by splinters, but still the yacht held on unswervingly on her course.

"Those gunners aim well, Senor General," quietly remarked Isodor, addressing the Cuban general, who stood by his side.

"They do, indeed; but I think we are gaining on the cutter," was the answer.

"Yes, senor, and rapidly, for the Cloud gets the wind full, now that she has gotten out from under the lee of the island— Oh! that was a bad shot," and still Isodor did not flinch, though a man standing near was cut down by a shot and several others were wounded, while a halyard, holding a well-drawing sail, was severed.

"Secure that sail!" shouted Isodor, and the black crew obeyed with alacrity.

The yacht was now dashing along at a terrific pace, for a ten-knot breeze was blowing, and the wind was steadily increasing.

The men were set to work to stow the arms in the hold, and when this was done she sailed more steadily, and when the crew again got upon the windward bulwarks, she sped along at a speed that showed all she would drop the cutter very soon out of range, if some unlucky shot did not disable her.

Still keeping up her hot fire, the schooner-of-war pushed on in pursuit, running fast, but no match for the flying yacht, and in an hour the shots began to fall short, and at dawn she was almost hull down astern, though still keeping up the chase.

To throw his pursuer off the track, Isodor headed along the Florida coast until nightfall; but as soon as darkness had hidden the schooner's sails from view, he changed his course for Cuba.

Knowing the coast as he did, and hoping to

find his father, he determined to make the landing near Villa Vista, and by going ashore in a canoe alone, he could visit the retreat of Velasquez, his old home, and discover if there were any traces of Patriots in the neighborhood.

Two nights after the Cloud ran in close to the shore.

It was a dark night, and clouds were flitting across the heavens, which betokened a storm.

There was one inlet upon the coast which Isodor knew well, and he was aware that it was not known to a dozen persons.

Into this inlet he ran the yacht and came to anchor, while he asked the Cuban general to keep the men from going ashore, and especially the negro crew, who might be tempted to desert to see their friends at the plantation.

Two points were then shown the general, where it would be well to place sentinels, to watch up and down the coast for the coming of any Spanish vessel.

As they could see for leagues in each direction, the yacht could get up anchor, set sail and have four or five miles' start in a race from a foe.

"Bueno is as good a sailor as I am, Senor General, and you need not fear to trust him, should you have to run out while I am away."

"Should I not return in twenty-four hours, you had better not wait for me, but seek other points on the coast, which I have marked here on this chart for you, and try and make a landing."

"Now I'll be off, and I hope to bring you good news."

Entering a light skiff, and with good wishes from all, Isodor rowed away from the yacht.

He continued up the inlet until he came to a narrow water-way among the rocks, and passing through this he came out into a sluggish lagoon, the banks of which were fringed with trees and vines.

Paddling up this after awhile he paused under the same bridge, which he had crossed, the reader will remember, upon his way to the secret retreat of the Velasquez band.

Pushing on, paddling hard over the shallow water, he soon landed at the retreat.

But it was deserted, for no camp-fire met his gaze, and the glen was as dark as midnight.

To his call no response came, and springing ashore he advanced a few steps to suddenly fall over some object.

There was a sickening odor in the glen, and his torch soon told him that he had fallen over a dead body.

Going back to his boat he took out a dark-lantern, and turning its rays upon the glen he beheld a dozen or more dead forms, some Spanish soldiers in their uniforms, others Cubans of the Secret League.

Nowhere did he see his father, Velasquez or De Soto, and he breathed more freely.

There were charred remnants of the conspirator camp, and the dead bodies told the story.

Sick at heart Isodor returned to his boat, retraced his way down the lagoon, turned from it down the coast, and after going a league turned into the little bay from which he had sailed a month before, leaving his father standing upon the pier waving a farewell.

He ran ashore near a large rock, fastened his skiff, and slowly ascending the sloping lawn soon drew near the villa.

All was darkness and solitude about it; but the moon, rising late, was just peering above the distant hilltops, and its light falling upon the villa, caused Isodor to start and utter a cry of mingled pain and amazement.

"Virgin Mother! the villa is in ruins!" he gasped, and he darted across the lawn and soon stood before the ruin.

The white walls, charred and blackened by smoke and fire, still stood, but the once beautiful home was a ruin.

Bowing his head and taking off his cap, the boy stood a moment in bitter anguish for the destruction of that spot he loved best of all others upon earth.

His mother and sister were far away in a foreign land, his home was in ashes, he stood there in deadly peril of his life, and his father— what of him?

Was he dead or alive?

Who could tell?

In anguish of spirit the brave boy raised his right hand and cried:

"My home is in ashes, my mother and sister fugitives, and my father perhaps dead! Oh! if he be dead, here, on this sacred spot, I swear to show no Spaniard mercy until he is bitterly avenged!"

As the boy uttered this oath of vengeance, there suddenly broke upon the air the long-drawn-out howl of a hound, the sound coming

from beyond the ruined villa, and echoing in the heart of poor Isodor as an ill omen of more bitterness and sorrow to come upon him.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RETURN TO CUBA.

AFTER the deep howl of the hound had died away, Isodor gave a low whistle, and a moment after there came bounding to his side a large hound.

He recognized it at once as his father's pet animal, and the recognition was mutual, for the brute sprung upon his breast and fawned and whined in a most joyous manner.

"Down, Sancho, down, and tell me where your master is," said the youth.

The dog again uttered a howl, this time in a low voice, and started off in a direction toward the fort.

"My God! can my father be dead?—for he leads me toward our family burying-ground," said Isodor, and he followed the hound at a rapid pace.

The villa he saw was a complete ruin, the walls alone standing, and the out-buildings had also been burned.

The hound led the way by the gravel road leading through the forest, and by the negro village, and here too was destruction, for the adobe walls of the slaves' cabins alone remained.

The vast sugar-house had also been destroyed by fire, and ruin and desolation lay upon all sides.

In a quiet nook was the burying-ground of the Christobals, and Isodor leaped the low wall and gazed quickly around for a new-made grave; but he gave a deep sigh of relief as he found none there.

The hound seemed disquieted at the delay of the youth, and whined impatiently, so Isodor continued on his way along the carriage drive.

A walk of half a mile brought him to the large gateway that led into the De Soto plantation.

The gate was broken down and cast one side, so that ruin still dogged the footsteps of the unhappy boy.

It was nearly a mile to the De Soto mansion, but Isodor walked rapidly on, for there, if that house was not also in ruins, he could learn all he wished to know.

Soon the glimmer of a light met his gaze, and he knew that it came from the hallway of the De Soto mansion.

The hound still led the way, and in ten minutes more Isodor slowly crept up to the door of the house.

It was a handsome house, for the De Sotos were rich, and there dwelt Leon, his parents and his little sister of twelve.

Isodor knew well his danger, and that he must not be seen by any one who might betray him.

So he bade the faithful hound to lie down in the shadow of a tree, and ascending to the piazza he knocked lightly upon the door.

The library shutters were closed, so that the light in the hallway alone was visible, shining through the glass arch over the front door.

Again he knocked, and then he heard a step within.

"Who is there?" asked a stern voice.

"Senor Leon, it is an old friend!" answered Isodor, recognizing the voice of the young Cuban.

An exclamation of surprise followed, and then bolts were drawn back and the door swung open.

"Isodor!" and the young man grasped the youth's hand and dragged him indoors, and ushered him into the library.

"I was just about to retire, and all else are in bed."

"But from whence do you come?" he eagerly asked.

"From the United States, senor,"

"And your sister and mother?"

"Are safe, and comfortably settled in Mobile."

"The Virgin be praised, but—"

"Tell me quickly of my father, senor!"

"You have been to your home?"

"Alas, yes, and all is a ruin."

"It was the work of Colonel Morelos, when he learned that your sister had escaped him."

"Oh Heaven's curses rest upon him," groaned the boy, and then he added:

"But my father, my father?"

"He was captured the night you sailed, by Morelos and his troopers, and—"

"Shot?"

"No, but it is said he is to be executed to-morrow."

Isodor started and turned deadly pale, while Leon De Soto continued:

"Morelos captured your father, and then finding that your sister had sailed, with you and your mother, he was in a towering rage, turned his soldiers loose to sack the villa, and burn it and the cabins of the slaves, who were driven off as confiscated property, along with the horses, cattle and all on the place."

"Colonel Morelos then continued his work of destruction, and led by some traitor, attacked our retreats, captured our munitions of war, killed our guards and carried his devilish work so far as to arrest a score or more of prominent planters, and they are to be executed to-morrow in the plaza of the town."

"But this is not all, for news has come to us that General Lopez, with a vessel loaded with arms, and bearing some two hundred volunteers was pursued by an American cruiser, it having left a port of the United States, and was captured in sight of our shores and carried back, when those on board will be tried for breaking the neutrality laws."

"So you see, Isodor, poor Cuba has received a fearful blow, and why I escaped arrest with the others is owing to what I did not believe Morelos possessed, gratitude, for you remember I once saved his life in Havana when he was attacked by assassins?"

Isodor listened to this bitter story with a face like marble, making no interruption the while.

Then he told Leon De Soto, in a voice that was cold and firm, of the timely warning which had allowed them to escape in the yacht, and his meeting with the brig that bore General Lopez and his fellow Patriots.

"And so our cause is lost," said Leon De Soto sadly.

"For the present, yes; but a day of reckoning will yet come to the Spaniards, a day of freedom to Cubans; but, Senor Leon, I must see my father."

"That will be impossible."

"Will you not go with me to-morrow?"

"You will be recognized and instantly executed with the others."

"Can I not go in disguise, senor?"

"Ah! that may be; and I will arrange it for you, but upon one condition."

"Yes, senor."

"That you return to-morrow night to your yacht and run back to America; in fact I will go with you, for if you remain here your death will follow quickly, and your poor mother and sister will be without a protector."

"Also, Isodor, it is your duty to save the cargo and the lives now on your yacht, and depending upon you."

"If you will do as I wish, Isodor, I will rig you up in a false beard and wig I once wore to a fancy ball, give you the suit of a student which I have, and we will start in the morning to the town."

"Do you promise, Isodor?"

"Yes, senor, for I know you act for the best."

"Then I will return on foot with you, for I dare not risk getting horses from the stables, and we can have a talk with the general and agree to join him after dark to-morrow night."

"I will give out that I am going to Havana, and my parents and sister will not be disturbed, I feel confident."

Isodor having agreed to this arrangement, the young Cuban went up to tell his father that he was going out, but wished no one to know it, and the two slipped away from the house, the faithful hound still following.

Without adventure they reached the skiff and soon after were on board the yacht, and in communication with the Cuban office; but, after a short stay they were put on shore, by a boat from the Cloud, and reached the mansion just before dawn.

Hastily they sought Leon De Soto's room, and retired to snatch a few hours' sleep, after which they arose, and, dressed in his disguise, which was a most clever one, Isodor descended with his friend to breakfast, when he was introduced as a student from Havana, who had arrived during the night, his coming not even disturbing the servants.

After breakfast the two entered the family carriage and were driven rapidly toward the town, to which vast numbers were flocking, to witness the execution of thirteen Cuban conspirators, the chief of whom was Don Piedra Christobal.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CONSPIRATORS' FATE.

IN the throng that was surging toward the town, were many Cubans, whose hearts were aching at the scene that they were called upon to witness, for Colonel Morelos, in making an example of the conspirators, was determined that

it should be a lesson to their allies, and had ordered that all planters be in attendance.

Mary could but submit to this command, and they went with sorrow in their hearts and stern faces.

Toward the town then this tide of humanity was setting, and the vehicle that held Leon De Soto and Isodor could but roll on with the crowd.

The town soon came into view, and the sound of martial music was heard.

The plaza was large, with the high wall of a monastery upon one side, and stores, a hotel, a chapel and private houses upon the other.

In the plaza were drawn up regiments of Spanish soldiers, who formed three sides of a hollow square, the open side being toward the adobe wall of the monastery.

The bells of the churches were tolling dismally, and the bands had begun to play slow music, as the *volante*, bearing De Soto and Isodor arrived.

The crowd pressed slowly around the soldiers, and a silence rested upon every lip.

Forced forward by other vehicles, the *volante* containing Isodor and De Soto gained a place close up to the spot where the execution must take place.

The *garrote** was already in its place near the adobe wall, but the prisoners had not yet arrived.

"Oh! this is terrible!" moaned Isodor, adding:

"How I would like to grasp my poor father's hand and speak but one word to him!"

"It would be utter madness for you to attempt it; but I will take the risk of telling him that you are here, if Colonel Morelos will allow me to speak to him, and I shall ask him."

"Thank you."

Now came the roar of an advancing band, playing a dirge.

It was the head-quarters band, and all knew that the conspirators and their guards were coming, and the regimental bands ceased playing.

Nearer and nearer it came, and soon appeared in sight the band, then a hollow square formed by a platoon of infantry, and in their midst, walking erect, the prisoners.

They were in irons, but held their heads up fearlessly.

Behind them came Colonel Morelos, his staff in brilliant uniform, and his escort of troopers.

They filed into the open space, the prisoners, thirteen in number, being placed near the *garrote*, and Colonel Morelos and his staff taking their stand in front.

"My father is there," moaned Isodor.

"Yes—wait, and on your life move not from the *volante*," whispered De Soto, and springing out he made his way along the line, and asked an officer to permit him to speak to Colonel Morelos.

The officer knew the regard his commandante had for the young Cuban and obeyed.

A moment after he returned and led the Cuban to the colonel's side.

Colonel Morelos was pale and stern, but a glitter of vengeance shone in his eyes.

"Well, Senor De Soto, is it not a strange request to ask to see me at this time?" he asked, coldly.

"I have presumed to do so, Colonel Morelos, from the fact that I once rendered you a service," was the reply.

"Granted; but I prove my appreciation of that by your not being among those conspirators at this moment."

"I thank you, Senor Colonel; but the one who has given you the names of those thirteen conspirators, and mine too, if you will have it so, may be wrong, or actuated by revenge in some cases; but that is not my affair, and I thank you, admitting your power to have me *garoted* too."

"Well, senor?" said Colonel Morelos impatiently.

"I would ask the favor of you, Colonel Morelos, that you allow me to say farewell to those doomed men."

"They are all my friends, and one kind word may aid them to bear up under the doom they must meet, and certainly no harm can come of it."

* The mode of execution in Spain and her colonies. The criminal is seated in a rude chair, his head being placed leaning back against a support which is prepared for it. This being done, an iron yoke, or collar, is placed tightly around the neck, just at the throat, and secured behind. The executioner then turns a screw at the back of the head, the point of which penetrates the skull at the base of the brain causing instant death.—THE AUTHOR.

"To no other man would I grant such request, De Soto; but to you I will."

"I thank you, Colonel Morelos, and after your words I cannot regret that I once saved your life."

"May I speak with them now?"

"Yes, señor; guard, permit the Señor De Soto to pass along the line of conspirators."

De Soto bowed, and walked straight toward Don Christobal who stood at the head of the line. Don Christobal saw his approach with surprise, and his face lighted up as he drew near.

The Don stood erect, his face pale, but firm as a rock, and his eyes defiantly meeting his foes.

"Can it be possible that that fiend Morelos, permits this?" he asked quickly.

"I begged it, Don Christobal, for the sake of the service I had once done him."

"I remember, and it was bold and kind in you, De Soto."

"Don Piedra, I would say that your wife and daughter arrived safely in Mobile, and are pleasantly located there, while Isodor returned in the yacht, under orders from the Junta, and—"

"Oh, God have mercy upon him!" came through the shut teeth of the doomed man.

"He is safe, and in disguise has come here with me."

"He bids me say farewell and Heaven bless you, and tell you that he will comfort his mother and sister, while, if the patriot cause now fails, some day it will break out with a force that will sweep the Spaniards into the sea, and that then you will be avenged."

"God bless him, and tell him his dying father bids him farewell."

De Soto could utter no other word, for his emotion choked him, and he passed on rapidly down the line, pressing the manacled hand of each doomed man, and uttering a broken:

"Farewell, and God help you!"

Turning at the end of the line, he walked back toward Colonel Morelos, raised his hat in thanks, and hastened back to his *volante*.

Like a statue sat Isodor, his face calm and white, but the false beard hiding the white teeth pressed hard into the lips.

His hands were clinched until the nails dug into the palms; but his eyes burned with a malignant fire that was fearful.

A roll of drums, then a dead silence, and next the order for the execution to begin.

In the refinement of his hatred against the father of Estrella Christobal, Colonel Morelos ordered that he should be the last to die, thus forcing Don Christobal to witness the death of his unfortunate comrades.

One by one they took a seat in the fatal chair, and quickly their death followed.

Fearless and nobly they met their end, one by one, until Don Christobal was the last.

Then Colonel Morelos rode forward and bending low in his saddle, hissed forth:

"Had you forced your daughter to marry me, your life would have been spared!"

Don Christobal made no reply, but gave his enemy a look of defiant scorn, and stepping forward with dignity, took his seat.

Another instant and the conspirator chief had followed his comrades.

"Drive home!" sternly ordered Leon De Soto, and the black driver drove on.

"My God, this is not war, but revenge! Had my father died in battle I could forgive his slayers, but now I never can, and some day my revenge will come!" said Isodor, in a hoarse voice, as the *volante* rolled rapidly back toward the De Soto plantation.

Suddenly the horses shied badly, a shriek was heard, and the *volante* stopped short with a fearful jolt.

"Great God! Damon, you have run over a woman," cried Leon De Soto, springing out.

"It was her fault, Señor Master, for she ran across the road before the horses," answered the negro.

"Ha! it is Fanita the Hermitess!"

"I fear she is killed!"

"No, I am alive, but fearfully hurt."

"I was lost in thought, and did not notice the horses."

"Take me to my home, please," she gasped.

De Soto placed her in the *volante*, Isodor supporting her head, and the negro drove rapidly on, drawing rein only when he saw the family physician on horseback ahead.

"Doctor Varona, this lady is severely injured, and I beg you to follow us to her home," cried De Soto, and the doctor followed at a gallop.

Arriving as near the Hermit's cabin as the *volante* could go, the three bore her into it, and were met by the old sailor, who sprung to his daughter's side, crying:

"Will she die? Will she die?"

Doctor Varona examined her injuries and said:

"A broken collar-bone, a rib and an arm; but there are no internal injuries, and she will recover."

"Thank God!" groaned Fuentes, and De Soto was drawing Isodor from the cabin when Fanita called to him.

Approaching her, she motioned to him to bend over, and whispered hoarsely:

"I know you, for I saw under your beard, as I lay in your arms."

"You are Isodor Christobal, and in seeing me thus you are avenged, for I was the traitor who betrayed the conspirators, and I did it to get revenge for the murder of Rafael Ramirez."

"Go now, and leave Cuba, would you save your neck from the *garote*, boy though you are."

Isodor started at her words, his form quivered, but without a word he turned and left the cabin.

Two hours after they were at the De Soto mansion, anxiously awaiting the coming of night, when the Cloud was to fly from the land of treachery and death.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

WITH the coming of night Leon De Soto bade his parents and sister farewell, and carrying the little luggage he wished to take with him, he and Isodor set out for the inlet where lay the yacht at anchor.

Without accident they reached the shore, a hail brought a boat from the yacht, and half an hour after, with Isodor at the helm, the Cloud was standing out into deep water.

As she gained an offing, out from the shore came a Spanish cruiser, and gave chase, firing heavily.

But the nimble yacht out-sailed the Spaniard and soon dropped her astern.

As his craft was known to the cruisers in Mobile Bay, Isodor headed for New Orleans, where he safely landed the Cuban general and his men and afterward the cargo of arms.

Then he laid the Cloud up and he and Leon De Soto took the steamer for Mobile.

To narrate the scene that followed the breaking of the evil tidings to the Señora Christobal and Estrella, would be impossible, so I can only say that the fugitive family of the conspirator chief were overcome with sorrow, until a second time General Lopez started upon an expedition to free the Ever Faithful Isle, when among his most daring *aides* was Isodor the Young Conspirator, who won a name among his countrymen that will never be forgotten.

THE END.

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